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# St. Benedict the Man

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authorized translation of

THE MORAL PHYSIOGNOMY OF ST. BENEDICT

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by  
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## P R E F A C E

THE three studies presented here will help the reader to understand better the inner personality of St. Benedict. It is not the exterior life of the great Patriarch that we wish to present; our effort here is of another sort. By bringing together the authentic texts—which alone are capable of showing us the soul of the Saint—our effort is directed towards reconstruction of his moral physiognomy.

We have purposely refrained from using the pseudo-historical documents, to which several of the biographers of St. Benedict have too easily given credence. Such works are the *Acts of St. Placid*, the account of the life of St. Maurus by Faustus, a disciple of St. Benedict, the assertions of Peter the Deacon, monk of Monte Cassino during the twelfth century.

Our first two essays are based exclusively—the one, on the analysis of the Rule written by St. Benedict himself; the other, on the account of his life, composed fifty years after his death by Pope St. Gregory the Great. Our third essay, treating of the kindred spirit possessed by St. Benedict and St. Francis de Sales, shows how the Benedictine ascetical doctrine retains practical value in the twentieth century; how it remains ever living and in contact with the needs of souls.

Dom Columba Marmion noted long ago this doctrinal relation between these two Saints. On February 28, 1904, he wrote: "I am convinced that of all the modern mystic authors St. Francis de Sales has

more of the spirit of St. Benedict." On January 30, 1902 he had written in a similar strain: "I have recently read the eleventh book of the *Treatise on the Love of God*, by St. Francis de Sales; all our ideas are found there."

One can find resemblances in all the saints. All sanctity is begotten by the Gospel and the redemptive grace of Christ; consequently its basis is the same among all of God's elect. But besides these similarities of Christian perfection there exists among the saints—with great differences of nature and temperament—likenesses of soul which create a certain relationship of spirit between them. These qualities flow from their personal character and are not the result of the Christian foundation of their whole life. The analysis of the relationship of spirit between St. Francis de Sales and St. Benedict will help in acquiring a better knowledge of the moral physiognomy of the latter. It will bring out the fine shades of character—otherwise difficult to attain—which only the tendencies of his ascetical teaching can reveal.

The inner personality of a man is a complex reality. In order to present it accurately it is necessary to consider it from different angles.

In order to avoid repetitions we have tried to give in each chapter only those details of character that are not brought out elsewhere. These three essays will concur, each one in its own way, and all mutually completing one another, in showing the harmonious and admirable whole of the moral physiognomy of our holy Patriarch.

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**St. Benedict the Man**

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE MORAL PHYSIOGNOMY OF ST. BENEDICT ACCORDING TO HIS RULE

### Summary:

Definition of character. How to find in the Rule the characteristics of St. Benedict. Three ways:

- I. The points to which St. Benedict always returns: they reveal his spirit of order, his gravity,—considerate, religious, austere, his spirit of ruling wisely.
- II. The special manner in which St. Benedict views certain monastic virtues reveals special aspects of his personality: humility, firmness, obedience in love, sense of the possibilities of nature and of its accord with grace, sanctification by little things, care for urbanity, psychological finesse.
- III. The "*obiter dicta*", those things said on the spur of the moment, allow us to look into the soul of St. Benedict to see his tenderness, his paternal heart.
- IV. Synthetic view of the character of St. Benedict.

THAT which distinguishes morally one person from another is his character. Man unveils his real, inner personality less by the things he thinks, desires, says and does, than by the

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manner in which he thinks, says, desires and does them. Let us consider two virtuous men, or even two saints: both will love good and will abhor evil, but each will have his way of loving and his way of hating, and it is precisely by reason of this difference in manner that we recognize in each a moral physiognomy or a character proper to the individual. Character thus understood is an intimate habit of being, which rules our manner of acting.

One might define character as the sum of the dispositions and of the qualities of the moral order which influence the manner in which each one judges, chooses, acts and reacts.

The character of each man is necessarily composed of different elements. The first is the physical stratum of the moral life: it is the sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, or melancholic type of temperament which nature gives us. It results from the habitual tension of the muscles and of the nerves, from the quality of the blood, from the functioning of each organism. Then we distinguish the dominant passion, that is, a sentiment deeply rooted in us which governs, sometimes without our knowing it, all our internal movements. This sentiment may be egoistic or generous, humble or pretentious, optimistic or discouraging, enthusiastic and open to great ideas or greedy and closed to inspiration from on high. The flight of all our moral life depends on this dominant passion.

Character supposes two other elements: a proper manner of feeling or of being impressed by things and ideas, and a personal way of acting and reacting to them. It is by considering these two points that one ordinarily distinguishes the impressionable from the cold characters, the reserved from the expansive, the strong from the weak according to their capacities to realize their plans and to react against the obstacles from without and repugnances from within.<sup>1</sup>

Without trying in any way to class the character of St. Benedict in these categories—always very arbitrary—we ask the question: can we, after fourteen hundred years, taking the Rule as our basis, arrive at a more or less objective idea of the moral physiognomy of the great patriarch? Can we with some measure of certitude reconstruct the principal traits of his inner personality? We believe that we can.

Without doubt the same holds true regarding one's moral physiognomy as regarding one's physical countenance: the descriptions which one makes of it will inevitably fall short of the reality because they are not taken from life, but are merely reconstructions of one's mind. It is only by having observed a person closely and by having lived with him that one is enabled to seize the multiple and complex aspects and the finer points of his character in that unity and harmony proper to life. If, from a distance,



we wish to rediscover something of the inner personality of St. Benedict, it will be necessary to reconstruct it mentally by means of discerning and of prudent inference, based on the objective analysis of the texts. The study of the Rule will thus permit us to rediscover a trace of the heart, of the thought, and of the sacred spirit with which it was written. It is true that St. Benedict in his ascetic teaching takes large excerpts from Holy Scripture, from Cassian, and from the Fathers; it is true also that the greater part of the practical prescriptions of his Rule are only a codification and a putting into practice of the monastic tradition of the ancients; nevertheless his Holy Rule is not a collection of impersonal citations. In the whole, as in the details of these seventy-three chapters, there is revealed a powerful personality. Behind the words, intermingled with extracts and inferior Latin, we perceive a very personal thought, a mild but strong will, a beating heart.

In this chapter we would like to suggest to the reflecting reader three means or three ways by which it appears possible to us to disentangle from the text of the Rule itself the most important characteristics of the moral physiognomy of St. Benedict. First, we shall examine the points on which he insists most and to which he always returns, and which reveal, we believe, the orientation of his personality. Secondly, we shall analyze his manner of treating certain

jects and finally, we wish to study certain expressions, made as it were, in passing; the *inter dicta*, which reveal the depths of his soul. We have resolved not to write anything except what is gathered from the study of the Holy Rule.

## I. POINTS OF EMPHASIS

Among the details on which St. Benedict insists let us put in first place the desire for order. The conception which the holy Patriarch has of the life of a monk is essentially well-ordered. Whether there is question of the recitation of the Divine Office, or of work, of rising or of going to bed, of the time of trial in the novitiate, or of the reception of guests, of the refectory as well as of the kitchen, he always wishes that the house of God be well governed.<sup>2</sup> Each page of the Rule has traces of this care for good order. One feels in many cases that the Saint, without being meticulous, instinctively opposes slovenliness, lack of foresight, and all that smacks of disorder. He directs that one should keep an account, in order to know exactly what is given and what is received. He wants to have this spirit of order also in reading, as he legislates concerning the books given out at the beginning of Lent: "let them read the books from beginning to end." Reading during the meals will not be chosen at random, but will be regulated. He cannot bear idleness—loss of time.

When one returns from a journey he must give back the clothes which he had obtained from the vestry. The old clothes shall be saved and given to the poor.

This attention of the Patriarch to foresee and to regulate the little things is only a part—and the least part—of his spirit of order. The whole of the Rule, by the conciseness and the energy of its formulae, by a certain dignity in the tone, by the clear exposition of its essential notions, attests the existence in St. Benedict of a genius for organization, related indeed to that of the ancient Roman legislators and builders of the empire, though exhibiting its own Christian coloring.

A second aspect of the character of St. Benedict, evidenced by the whole of the Rule, is gravity. He does not like too much laughter, nor hasty decisions, nor profusion of words, nor the forgetting of responsibilities, nor lightness of spirit. He recommends, on the contrary, a calm, attentive, silent, respectful gravity. Whether it is necessary to regulate the exterior bearing of the monk, or to suggest the interior dispositions useful to prayer, or to pass judgment on a point of the spiritual life or of claustral discipline, the word of the legislator is always grave and reflective. He has considered the *pro* and the *con*, he has taken into account the ideal and the capacity of those who must try to realize it. Even when the monk must endure suffering or

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contradiction, St. Benedict recommends to him, together with the love of Christ, a silent gravity. The formula by which he expresses his thought is like a Christianized echo of ancient Roman stoicism: *let the monk silently embrace patience.*

At no place in the Rule can one affirm that this gravity is hard, exaggerated, or unsociable. It is quite the contrary. We think that this gravity may be characterized by the following details: first of all, it is well-balanced, that is, it predisposes the Saint to desire calmly the right measure in everything. Hence the constant care of the perfect discretion, so emphasized in the Benedictine Rule, as Pope Gregory observes. In the direction of souls, in the relations with one's neighbor, in the equilibrium between the hours of prayer and the hours of work, in the prescriptions concerning material things, everywhere in the Rule we find this unique preoccupation of not exceeding in anything. It is by this balancing spirit that the holy Patriarch measured and adapted the monastic ideal of the East to the needs and capacities of the West.

Again the gravity of St. Benedict is essentially religious, that is, it results not from a proud feeling of complacency in one's self and of contempt for one's neighbor, but in an habitual and profound sentiment of the Divine Presence. The responsibilities, the eternal stake of life, the love of Christ, the view of the divine judg-

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ments are always present to him. All this interior life, gained by the habitual practice of maintaining a dignified attitude during Divine Office, tends to make this gravity a true recollection of soul, which shines forth in the exterior actions of the body. In his thought it is the regard of God, the feeling of the intimate relation of man with Him which banishes from life frivolity and levity and engenders a humble and mild gravity.

This disposition did not permit St. Benedict to consider the infractions of monastic discipline as negligible. The Rule was for our Patriarch an object of respect, for it is by his fidelity in observing it that the monk must assure himself of his eternal destiny; that is why he insists, even though foreseeing that the rod must be used, on the necessity of correcting faults. St. Benedict attaches a great importance to this part of the abbatial charge, and it is to emphasize this that he develops at length the penitential chapters. Though the correction alone is not sufficient, it is nevertheless useful to all in every function.<sup>3</sup> To the spirit of order, to religious gravity, we add a third characteristic, that of ruling firmly but wisely. St. Benedict could not conceive a monastery subsisting without unified and absolute authority. The Abbot alone makes the appointments regarding the governing of the men and the administration of the goods. His authority is not only general, it extends to

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the details of the lives of the monks. The Abbot regulates the work; he judges concerning dispensations, both regarding table and Divine Office. It is he who puts such or such an object at the disposition of each monk; he decides concerning the use of gifts which may have been made to them; he gives the signal for the Work of God; he punishes and accepts satisfactions for punishment.

We can be sure that this spirit of authority and centralization in St. Benedict is not the result of a proud spirit of domination. If the holy Legislator wishes that the Abbot have absolute power and that he be normally without any other restraint than the judgment of God, it is because of a real fear of disorder brought into the religious life by conflicts of jurisdiction and by the existence of powers independent of the abbatial authority. He clearly affirms this in the chapter concerning the Prior.

St. Benedict, nevertheless, tempers this absolutism by the institution of regular counselors. He recommends to the Abbot, conformably to Holy Scripture, that he do nothing without counsel. For the less important things advice of certain of the older monks suffices. But when there is question of something of greater moment, St. Benedict wishes that the Abbot assemble the entire community in chapter, that he know how to listen to the suggestions of all, even of the youngest, and that, after this gesture



of prudent and condescending faith, he resume all his abbatial authority to reflect and decide the thing alone.<sup>4</sup>

One can, then, affirm that a wisely dominating tendency contributes to characterize the moral physiognomy of St. Benedict, but it must be added that this tendency, so profoundly anchored in his soul, is the result of his desire to order everything well in the house of God and to see his sons sanctify themselves in peace and love.

## II. VIEW OF CERTAIN VIRTUES

The manner in which the holy Legislator speaks of virtues is also a revelation of certain details of his innermost personality. Let us note, first of all, that after having cited the instruments of good works in a considerable number, he chooses from among them three special virtues: habitual silence, obedience, humility, of which he treats in three chapters. Why this preference, if not because, by a hidden relation, his soul, sanctified by prayer and grace, is pleased by these virtues in a very special manner, and that he judges them essential, not to the Christian as such, but to the monk or the ascetic?

Let us see now what personal traits St. Benedict reveals in speaking of humility and of the other virtues. The chapter on humility in the thought of the Patriarch is as a bird's-eye

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view of the entire spiritual life. He marks there by steps the ascent of the soul towards God, from the renouncement of sin to the plenitude of charity.

One may ask, first of all, why St. Benedict has regarded this progressive march from the angle of humility in a way to accord with the development of this virtue the privilege of containing, so to speak, the increase of all the others. He could have maintained, and not without reason, that the ladder which leads to God is made of degrees of patience, or of graces of prayer, discursive prayer at first, then simplified, and finally prayer mystically uniting the soul to God. Or better yet, he could have said that this ladder was a succession of degrees of charity. If St. Benedict has preferred a conception of another kind, it is because, by personal tendency and orientation of grace he was predisposed to understand the ascending march of the soul as characterized by a more and more profound submission of man before God. This conception is the reflection of an interior life essentially religious and contemplative.

When one rereads the Institutions of Cassian,<sup>5</sup> which certainly has inspired St. Benedict, one is convinced immediately, in spite of the apparent extracts, that the chapter of the Rule has a doctrinal content much wider than that of Cassian. The Benedictine doctrine is a personal exposition of certain characteristics of humility.



These are cited, it is true, by Cassian, but the holy Patriarch has in a special way brought out their value, retouching them, amplifying them, and attaching them to the words of Christ and of Holy Scripture. The twelve degrees form a whole, astonishingly penetrating and harmonious, showing of what mixture of fear and confidence, of obedience and energy, of recollection and charity, the attitude of the monk who makes progress in the spiritual life should be composed.

Let us remark again that the comparison of the ladder is entirely foreign to Cassian. If St. Benedict has borrowed it, it seems that he must have done so from St. Jerome.<sup>5</sup> The highly theological aspect of this chapter comes to him precisely from this notion; it is by progress in submission and self-abasement that man elevates his soul, as by ascending steps towards divine union and heavenly exaltation. As indicated in the first degree it is the fear of God or the intimate feeling of the divine hand, ruling over human life, which causes man to abase himself and to submit himself, and that simultaneously he elevates himself and fixes himself in God by this same submission. The same movement of humility abases the obedient man and exalts him, bringing him closer to God. The profound sense of the thought of St. Benedict is the vindication of the evangelical truth that Cassian does not even cite: "he who abases himself by humility will be exalted..." that is, the more one

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progresses in true humility, the more one is absorbed in God, and the more one mounts towards the summits of union with Him.

We are therefore right in holding that he who conceived this doctrine, allows to appear there, amidst evident excerpts, a well defined personal conviction: an expression of his soul seriously attentive to the divine mystery and finding in this contemplation the secret of all renouncements as of his entire interior elevation in God.

That which St. Benedict writes on the virtues of obedience and of poverty reveals to us another aspect of his intimate personality, namely, his uncompromising firmness. Although the care never to exceed and to take account of all circumstances characterizes the Holy Rule, nevertheless when he tells the monks their duties of obedience and of poverty St. Benedict shows himself categorical, and it is in vain that one searches under his pen for cautions or compromises on these points. It is to the superior alone that he recommends the discernment of the just measure in these matters; the monk is to obey and not to murmur; to the monk belongs absolute poverty; all right to receive, to give or to appropriate anything whatsoever without the authorization of the Abbot is denied him under threat of very severe punishment. This categorical way of conceiving obedience and poverty conforms to what we have said above

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of the wisely dominating spirit of the holy Patriarch. It makes us touch, as we have said, the uncompromising side of his character no less than the cenobitic sense of his asceticism. The spiritual life of which St. Benedict traces the rules combats individualism in all its forms. Religious poverty and obedience are the most efficacious means of snatching man from a too-absorbing care of his own person and of making him live for God and his neighbor.

Certain lines written by the Patriarch on obedience<sup>7</sup> also reveal in his soul a profound tendency to act through love. In him there is a burning zeal for God and for Christ. In his thought obedience is not only an intimate disposition which inclines one to execute every commandment with promptitude and devotion because the moral order demands that the inferior submit to the superior; the obedience of the monk must be especially an exercise or a perpetual effort of love. It is exercised through the operations of theological hope and charity, *ex caritate confidens de adiutorio Dei obediat*. Obedience becomes thus an expression of an habitual disposition of the unitive life by the conformity or the perpetual communion of the human will with the divine will. We may conjecture then, with probability, that in his interior life of union St. Benedict realized in a very admirable manner this formula composed by St. Vincent de Paul: "God is a perpetual

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communion to the soul that does His will."

In his general manner of treating the virtues and monastic discipline, St. Benedict shows that he is endowed with a very exact sense of the capabilities of human nature and of the action of grace. Nothing in the Holy Rule leans towards Pelagianism, nothing exceeds in the contrary sense. The thought of the saint moves with perfect ease between these two extremes. No one is more sanely supernatural than he, seeing the destiny of man and the absolute necessity of grace to support and perfect our good actions. The entire doctrine of the prologue suggests that our spiritual effort is only a response. God speaks, God calls. To man it belongs to listen to the inviting voice and to obey it. The initiative therefore in the supernatural order pertains to God and to His grace. But in affirming the supernatural St. Benedict recognizes in nature real energies. Nature possesses power and aptitudes for aiding good and impeding evil. The Saint wishes that these resources be not neglected but that they be put to work. Thus manual labor and reading or study are in his thought a powerful means against the many temptations which assail the idle monk. Is not idleness the enemy of the soul? St. Benedict recommends loyalty, real sincerity, the faithful keeping of secrets: all virtues of the natural order. He wishes that the Abbot aid the morale of feeble souls by encouragement; that he watch lest

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anyone be overcome by sadness in the monastery and see that the spark of joy, even in Lent, enliven the asceticism. He is convinced that the natural feeling of being under surveillance and the thought of possible correction will impede the monk, as well in the oratory as otherwise, from being inattentive, negligent or tardy. How much he insists on vigilance and personal effort day and night!<sup>8</sup> In all these points the holy Patriarch certainly wishes to make use of the resources of human nature. However no one more than he is convinced that it is by the aid of Christ (*adjuvante Christo*) and by the help of grace that all true virtue is implanted in us, God alone being the primary and omnipotent cause of all good. "Omne bonum in se cum viderit Deo applicet non sibi." Before undertaking any good work, St. Benedict teaches, take care by instant prayer to ask the Lord to lead it to a good end. "To accomplish what is not easy to nature we must implore God to send us the help of His grace."<sup>9</sup>

Let us remark finally that St. Benedict has a broad view, but this does not impede him from comprehending—what St. Francis de Sales is to champion so ably after him—that *divine charity increases the practice of the little virtues in the soul*. When the Saint, in the chapter on good zeal, describes the monk animated with a monastic spirit, such as he himself is pleased to find among his sons, we do not see him in-



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sisting on very exalted virtues nor on the gifts of mystic prayer, nor on extraordinary mortifications, as one reads of in the lives of the Fathers. He desires, on the contrary, that fervor should dispose the monk to do the ordinary actions well and to support the daily contradictions with patience, forgetfulness of self and faithful attachment to God, to Christ, to the Abbot and to his confreres. Is not this sense of the importance of little occasions of virtue another significant characteristic which tends to complete the serious and great moral physiognomy of the holy Patriarch? Indeed our conditions of human existence are such that extraordinary occasions of practicing charity are rare. It is necessary then to make use of the thousand little details of life in order to increase in charity and to give them by a supernatural intention a larger and eternal value. The right understanding of the adaptation of grace to the conditions of existence makes St. Benedict insist on this point of view.

Again it is necessary to attach to this understanding of human nature, characteristic of the moral physiognomy of St. Benedict, solicitude for urbanity or manners and this very  *finesse d'esprit*  which is called the psychological sense.

The Patriarch seems to have attached great importance to the exercise of politeness. When

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there is question of receiving guests at the monastery or of strange monks considered as importunate, and whom it is necessary to send away, he insists that all be done politely. He wishes also that the brethren anticipate the wishes of one another, that they greet one another with deference and that polite and respectful manners rule their dealings with all men, even with the poor who beg at the door of the monastery.

St. Benedict understood the human heart. When he recommends so insistently to the Abbot that he adapt his words and his manner of acting to the soul and to the capacities of each one, is this not a sign that he himself seized the numerous slight differences of character and realized how often the word profitable to one monk is not always useful to another? He mentions the dangers to which certain virtues easily expose religious: *that they be not proud because of their good observance*. He can divine different interior movements, pusillanimities to which the common life may give birth, little susceptibilities, vanities and jealousies, discouragements, occasions of dissipation, laziness or murmuring, needs of human affection, antipathies; nothing escapes him.<sup>10</sup> We can then affirm that the holy legislator possessed a penetrating knowledge of the human heart and of its contents.

## III. THE "OBITER DICTA"

The third process which we wish to use in order to draw from the text of the Rule itself some significant indications of the inner character of the holy Patriarch is to analyze certain statements or reflections made by St. Benedict, as it were, in passing—the so-called *obiter dicta*. Indeed, the character of a man is often best revealed by this type of remark made off-hand; such are significant of an entire state of soul. We limit ourselves to the words of our holy Father which suggest something of the affective side of his personality. He has appeared to us as being of a reflective character, loving gravity in thought and attitude. He seems to have been of an interior temperament. However, under the austere deportment which is revealed by the entire style of the Rule, at times one perceives a great tenderness of heart, an affectionate and delicate soul. Reflective characters often appear cold, but in spite of the exterior, their soul is attentive and sensible. Two texts show us this affective side of the piety of St. Benedict and many others indicate his goodness of heart towards his neighbor.

In the middle of a page, not very personal, of the prologue of the Rule, he says suddenly: "What is there more pleasing, my dear brethren, than the voice of the Lord inviting us?" And farther on he adds: "It is with an inexpressible sweetness of love and with the heart



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enlarged that he runs towards God who makes progress in faith and in the habits of the monastic life." In these words do we not find the echo of the intimate experience of union with God felt by St. Benedict? It seems, from re-reading the context, that these words are as a profound conviction of heart which has suddenly escaped from the pen of the Master. Texts of this kind are rare in the Rule but very probably they permit us to grasp something of the interior life of the great Patriarch.

We experience again this tenderness of heart in many places where St. Benedict treats of the relations between the Abbot and his monks. Without doubt many of his words reflect above all the spirit of order and of balance; certain ones are severe, but the paternal heart always appears. The Abbot, he says, must love his monks while hating their faults; he must watch over all their needs, he must watch so that neither sadness nor overwork depress them; he must apply himself so that he be rather loved than feared. When the holy legislator tells the Abbot how he must be attentive and good towards those whom he punishes severely, it is in these lines especially that he reveals his paternal longanimity: the Good Shepherd of the Gospel gives him the example. It is all this together that St. Benedict names the *pii patris affectum*; the attitude of the good father which the Abbot should have, for authority in the

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monastery is not a "tyranny over strong souls, but a paternal watchfulness over the weak ones."<sup>11</sup>

We are now able to conclude: the text itself of the Rule has permitted us to find at least some details of the moral physiognomy of St. Benedict. His character is at the same time wisely dominating and desirous of ordering all things well. His gravity makes him poised and discreet in his judgments; in its last analysis this gravity is, above all, religious, identifying itself with recollection before God. His character is essentially powerful, but balanced: his austere power is tempered by a sweet compassion, his very supernatural view of things is bound with a precise sense of the needs and resources of human nature. His attitude is that of a father as well as that of a master. He is passionately faithful to the love of Christ and of God, but he understands the weaknesses that are present even among men of good will. He is taken entirely with self-abnegation and with the total giving of self to one's neighbor, but he is solicitous also for justice and equity in the dealings between the brethren. He unites love of the great and the wonderful with the love of poverty and of the right measure in the distribution of things. His authority knows how to be firm, but it is pleased to ask advice, and admits that there are exceptions to fixed rules. He has a profound sentiment of the de-

ficiencies and miseries of men, but he has also lively faith in divine grace and the greatness that it brings to man. That is why he wishes that the monk be humble and mortified, but he wishes also that he fix his regard on eternity and all its riches, and walk, strong in obedience, abandoning himself full of security to God Who has called him, Who awaits him and Who does not deceive.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dr. Hartenberg, *Physionomie et Caractere*, ch. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Rule*, ch. 53.

<sup>3</sup> It is this final detail of the moral physiognomy of the holy Legislator that was the cause of his formerly being represented—for example by Fra Angelico in his celebrated frescoe of the crucifixion in the convent of St. Mark—holding in his hand a rod as well as the holy Rule.

<sup>4</sup> *Rule*, ch. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *De Coenobiorum institutis*, 1.4, c. 39.

<sup>6</sup> D. Butler, *S. Benedicti Regulae editio critico-practica*, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> *Rule*, ch. 5, 7, 48, 71.

<sup>8</sup> *Rule*, ch. 48, Prologue, ch. 46, 49, 4, etc.

<sup>9</sup> *Rule*, ch. 4, and Prologue.

<sup>10</sup> See for example ch. 13, 36, 43, 54, 46.

<sup>11</sup> *Rule*, ch. 2, 44, 27.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE MORAL PHYSIOGNOMY OF ST. BENEDICT ACCORDING TO ST. GREGORY THE GREAT

Summary:

#### I. THE MAN OF GOD

St. Gregory, historian of St. Benedict.—The dominating trait of St. Benedict's character is essentially religious.—It frees the young Benedict from human cares and views.—Radical solutions: flight from Rome, the grotto, temptation overcome, departure for Casino, the bottle of oil.—It leads the Saint to lose himself in God through prayer; withdrawal from Subiaco.—Prayer: during the night on the mountain—prayer before miracles—vision of the world.—Theoprobe at the threshold of his cell.—Death before the altar.

#### II. ST. BENEDICT AND HIS NEIGHBOR

St. Benedict drawn from our human level by four qualities:

- 1) Goodness: the Goth; miracles performed through kindness; tenderness: Placid; Scholastica; pardon of offenses; kindness in reception of guests.
- 2) Fidelity in the observance of the Rule: for himself—he demands it from the monks.

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- 3) Simplicity and greatness: St. Benedict, the prophet, and Totila.—Details of simple life at Subiaco.
- 4) Power of organization: Casino, the holy mountain where everyone works.—Life of the monks organized in prayer and work.—Character of monastic work.—Social influence of the Abbey.

Moral physiognomy of St. Benedict—Benedictine peace.

### I. THE MAN OF GOD

WITH the intention of relaxing his mind from the work of governing the Church and in order to edify the faithful, the venerable Pontiff, St. Gregory the Great, undertook, towards 593, the publishing of a work entitled *The Dialogues*. In these pages he narrates a considerable number of pious anecdotes concerning contemporary personages: Popes, Bishops, Abbots, or lay persons. Only the life of St. Benedict has been given in its entirety. This is contained in the second of the four books of *Dialogues*. Our holy Patriarch had been dead fifty years when the Pontiff wrote. By nature St. Gregory was not an historian; nevertheless—especially for the life of St. Benedict—he cites with care the names and qualities of the witnesses from whom he says that he has received the facts of his narration. No one can legitimately doubt, regarding all that concerns

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St. Benedict, that the pages of St. Gregory are a sincere expression of a collection of precise remembrances, religiously preserved and handed down by those who had known the holy Patriarch.<sup>1</sup>

St. Gregory certainly did not exercise the same spirit of circumspection regarding the numerous miracles of his heroes as the Church does in our day, in the critical examination, for example, of the alleged facts in the process of canonization. The Pontiff was a narrator of his time. He freely collected the accounts of miraculous events and was not much inclined to be suspicious of those who related and interpreted them. Were there in all these facts real, supernatural, miraculous interventions? We have no means of making a definite decision. "We have here," as Dom Morin has well written, "a matter on which, in principle, it is better not to pronounce. It is a matter to be left to God."<sup>2</sup> To taste the charm of these pages it is necessary to read them with the same disposition of soul in which St. Gregory wrote them. Then only will we be able to admire in its grandeur the calm and powerful path of the life of our venerable Patriarch and experience the holy impression that the influence of his words and actions produced on his contemporaries.

In every man, as we have said in the preceding chapter, the moral physiognomy or character is ruled by a dominating sentiment



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closely identified with his inner personality. This sentiment, apparent or latent, rules the entire manner in which one judges and acts. It is this which makes our character fundamentally egoistic or generous, tending towards ostentation or to modesty, pessimistic and chagrined, or optimistic and joyful. The moral level of the soul depends above all on this sentiment.

The dominating element of the character of St. Benedict, insofar as the thirty-eight chapters of his life permit us to examine its nature, is essentially religious; the thought of the divine impregnates, absorbs, and rules his entire life. Benedict appears to have been led by a powerful and enveloping aspiration towards God alone; he searches for the face of God. His entire life, from its beginning to its climax, appears to us to be the fruit or expression of a will turned towards God alone. By an affinity, intimate but sovereignly strong, with the invisible reality of the Most High, this soul was not fully itself except when it felt itself in the hand of God, enveloped in all His power. The dominant note of the character of St. Benedict is then, in truth, a profound spirit of religion, a seeking after the divine so intimately rooted in himself that it seems to be the foundation of his personality. This tendency has nothing of mere theory nor of chance but it is as a calm and powerful movement incessantly lifting his soul to God.

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It belongs to this religious tendency, when it is fully weighed, not only to draw the soul to God but also to strengthen it against the solicitations of this life here below and to force it to break, in an absolute manner, with all that slows or impedes its ascending march. Every compromise with the created, every tinkering with evil is incompatible with this pure seeking of the divine. The heart that is intent on willing nothing but God, leaves all to seek Him.

Thence it is that from his infancy Benedict is serious, "regulating his manners with the maturity of one advanced in years..."<sup>3</sup> He feels himself to be only for God and this religious orientation dominates his thought to such a point that his eyes, when a young man, "...seeing the world, found no charm in it." He renounces his literary studies, he leaves his paternal home and his possessions. The desire to please God becomes the only *raison d'être* of all his decisions, *solī Deo placere desiderans*; and pushing all else aside, separating himself from all, he retires into a deep gorge of the Sabine mountains, into a grotto near Subiaco, some miles from Rome.

So great was his search for God alone, that he lived in prayer, renouncing all the luxuries of life, nourished only by some scraps of food, which the charity of a stranger let down to him in a basket from the rock on high.



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Alluding to this solitary life St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the persons vowed to God can, from the beginning of their conversion, live not only in a more or less perfect state of life, but also may receive from God very different degrees of grace. This is why the holy Doctor remarks that St. Benedict, because he began with the eremitical life, must be placed among those who, from the beginning of their holy life have been found to be beneficiaries of God's generosity in a very high degree: "...he began at a height to which others attain only after a long life."<sup>4</sup>

So great is the intimate appreciation St. Benedict had of the value of the union of the soul with God, that extreme or absolute resolutions appeared to him as the best when there was question of the reign of God in his soul. His flight and his hidden life at Subiaco are a first indication of this. His very energetic way of overcoming the temptation of the flesh which attacked him in this solitude is yet a more striking indication of this.

While he prayed, St. Gregory narrates,<sup>5</sup> the temptation presented itself to him; it harassed him, it did not leave him. The young Benedict, pressed because it threatened to conquer him, and seeing that his heart was oscillating between God and the remembrance of a loved creature, hesitated no longer: taking off his clothes he rolled himself in a thorn bush and prolonged

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this punishment "until the wounds of his flesh had brought a remedy to that of his spirit... the heroic battle had transformed the pleasure into a pain and henceforth temptation never troubled the peace of his heart any more." Here is another detail showing how the character of St. Benedict was moved to radical solutions when the reign of God in souls was at issue. From a solitary, at Subiaco, Benedict had become father of a rather numerous monastic family. According to the account of St. Gregory, Benedict's family formed different little groups scattered in the mountains. It happened that young hired girls, animated with a perverse spirit, came into a garden near the cells of the monks. The Patriarch sensed the possible danger for his young disciples, and deciding on an extreme solution, resolved to abandon these places rather than to expose to temptation the souls of his sons. Thus he departed for Monte Cassino, reuniting them all in one monastery. There he established himself, as in a fortress of God, on the summit of the holy mountain.

— An episode of the interior monastic life of Monte Cassino reveals to us again the absolute independence of the spirit of St. Benedict in relation to all things of this earth.

At a time of want the cellarer, in spite of the order of his Abbot, had refused to give some oil as alms, alleging that it was the last of the supply in the monastery. St. Benedict

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was angry at this mistrust of divine providence and, going to the extreme—not wishing that anything should be kept in the monastery in consequence of an act of disobedience—he had the bottle of oil thrown from the window over a precipice.

This uncompromising and absolute aspect of the spirit of the Holy Patriarch has already been seen in his holy rule, especially when he treats of obedience, of poverty, or of murmuring. On the contrary when the monastic vocation or the cause of God is not in consideration, the most perfect moderation presides over all his decisions and counsels.

Let us see how this same movement, bearing the soul of St. Benedict to God, inclined him to abase himself in prayer and in a continual and sublime colloquium with God. The narrations of St. Gregory abound in allusions to the prayer of the Saint, but in reality they picture only the frame-work and the exterior aspect. These descriptions, nevertheless, even though from without, permit us to catch or to surmise something of the secret of the Saint's prayer. Let us consider some of these accounts. They are full of charm, resulting from simplicity and truth, but above all they show us the holy Patriarch, as another Moses, issuing from his communion with God a greater man.

First of all why was the grotto of Subiaco for Benedict "a place of well-beloved solitude"?

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It is because it was for him primarily an oratory. This opening in the rock was the exterior shelter of his contemplative life. It is there, according to the word of St. Gregory, that "penetrated by the view of the Most High, he dwelt with himself alone."<sup>6</sup>

It is in this mysterious and prolonged contact of Benedict with God in the innermost part of his soul that it is necessary to seek the cause of his astonishing supernatural aptitude to read the secret thoughts of the heart, to predict the future, and to combat victoriously the evil spirit.

We have another picture of the prayer of the Patriarch. It dates from the time of his life when his disciples at Subiaco were divided into groups. We shall cite the account of St. Gregory.<sup>7</sup>

"Among the monasteries that Benedict had constructed in this place, three had been established on the ridge of the rocky mountain, and it was very troublesome for the brethren to descend constantly to the lake in order to draw the necessary water... Then the brethren of these three monasteries having assembled, came to the servant of God, Benedict, saying to him, 'It is a very hard task to have to go down daily to the lake to seek water; it will be necessary to change the location of our monasteries.' Benedict calmed them mildly and then sent them away. And that same night with the boy named Placid, who has been mentioned above, he climbed

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up the steep mountain, and there for a very long time he prayed....”

Let us not pass on without considering for a moment the prayer of our Holy Father, prolonged on the top of this rocky mountain during the silence of the night... The next day, according to the account of St. Gregory, on the spot where Benedict had prayed, water began to trickle forth and it was sufficient for the brethren to dig a little to permit it to gush forth in abundance.

In his rule St. Benedict recommends the application of the mind to prayer; he wishes above all that prayer should not entail too many words, but that it be made in all humility, with respect for God, with peace of heart and tears of compunction. In his own life we have an example of this.

Weighed down with sorrow, a peasant whose child had just died, came to Cassino to find the holy Abbot. He had carried in his arms the corpse of his child and had placed it at the gate of the monastery. The man of God was returning with his disciples from their work in the fields. The father went to meet him and as soon as he saw him he cried: “Give back my son to me, give back my son to me!” When the holy man understood that this father wished him to bring back his son to life, becoming very sad he said: “Depart, depart, it is not for us but for the holy Apostles to accomplish such

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things. Why do you wish to impose burdens on us that we cannot bear?..." St. Gregory continues: "When the man of God arrived with his brethren (at the gate of the monastery) he knelt and bent over the corpse of the child, then, raising himself up he held his hands towards heaven saying: 'Lord, look not on my sins but on the faith of this man who asks the resurrection of his son and give back to this little body the soul which Thou hast taken away.' These words of supplication had hardly been completed when the body of the child shook all over from the effect of the soul which re-entered into it...And, taking the child by the hand, Benedict restored him to his father, living and well."

St. Benedict loved to pray at night under the immensity of the heavens. The following lines concerning a miraculous vision reveal to us this habit of nightly prayer which the saint loved.<sup>8</sup>

"While the brethren were still taking their rest, the man of God, Benedict, accustomed to praying at night, had anticipated the hour fixed for the nightly prayer. He was standing at an open window, praying to God, and suddenly, at this dead hour of the night, he saw a radiant light brighter than the light of day. A wonderful thing happened in this contemplation: for—as he himself narrated afterwards—the entire world was brought before his eyes, as if it had been gathered in a single luminous ray..."



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St. Thomas Aquinas took occasion from this vision, narrated by St. Gregory, to teach that, here below, no matter what be the perfection of the contemplative life of the saints, their vision of God never attains the Divinity in its essence, but only—and such was the case of St. Benedict—a supernatural illumination of the spirit, enlightening it on those things which God reveals to it.<sup>9</sup>

To explain to the deacon Peter how it was possible that the Patriarch had enjoyed the view of the whole universe, collected, as it were, in one single ray of light, St. Gregory expresses himself thus: "Listen well, Peter, to that which I tell you. To the soul that contemplates the Creator, every creature becomes as nothing; through the effect of the enlightenment of the interior view, the depth of the soul is enlarged, and it broadens out in God in a way to become superior to the world... Heaven and earth were not then compressed (that Benedict might see them), but the soul of him was enlarged, so that, raised up to God, it was able to contemplate without difficulty all that was inferior to the Divinity."<sup>10</sup> Such was the prayer of St. Benedict, sublime and enlightened with supernatural brightness.

Another narration of St. Gregory shows us the man of God again at prayer, permitting us to catch him unaware in his cell at Cassino. With Theoprobe, a familiar friend, let us stop

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respectfully at the doorstep of this holy cell and contemplate the Saint prostrate in prayer and tears.<sup>11</sup>

St. Benedict had lived a life enveloped in the recollection of continual prayer; his death had to be a final and sublime flight of the spirit to God.

"Exhausted by fever, on the sixth day he ordered his disciples to carry him to the oratory. There he received the Body and Blood of the Lord to prepare for his departure from this world. Then he held himself erect, and while the arms of his disciples sustained his weakened members, he extended his hands toward heaven, and breathed forth his soul amidst words of prayer."<sup>12</sup>

We may now conclude that all the greatness of St. Benedict comes to him from God Himself. His soul, according to the expression of St. Gregory, was "one with the Lord, to the point of making but one spirit with him, to the extent of possessing as his own the very spirit of God."<sup>13</sup> The influence of his person, as the dominating trait of his character, is then essentially of a religious order.

### II. ST. BENEDICT AND HIS NEIGHBOR

The character of St. Benedict, as it appears in the narration of St. Gregory, is that of a man superior to nature, living in an atmosphere



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of peace and of interior strength, resulting from union with God. But this elevation of his soul, this atmosphere of peace and of strength which envelops him, does not make him a saint of a hieratic greatness, distant from us. St. Benedict is not a contemplative, so absorbed in the thought of the divine, as to give up all dealings with men. His sanctity is accompanied with profound human qualities, and thanks to them, he remains in close contact with us. These qualities are a condescending kindness which makes him stoop to the miseries of mankind, a spirit of fidelity to monastic observance, a humble simplicity joined to the influence of his strong personality, and finally, the gift of organizing a life of prayer and work.

Through this human side, which offsets the greatness of his character, the holiness of the Patriarch no longer merely commands our admiration, it invites us to confidence, to filial love, and to the imitation of Christian virtues which are eminently practical for us.

*His gracious kindness.* If St. Benedict was a wonder-worker it was especially from kindness that he performed miracles. The pictures of his life traced by St. Gregory show us his charity in action. He performed his miracles when pressed interiorly by love. The narration of them touches us sometimes more because of the sweet condescension of the Saint than by reason of the supernatural prodigy itself. Here is a

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very significant example of a miracle accomplished through kindness.<sup>14</sup>

"... A poor Goth asked of Benedict admission to the monastic state. The man of God received him most kindly. One day he had given him a work-tool of iron, called a sickle, because of its resemblance to a scythe, that he might clear away briars from a place where a vegetable garden was to be located. The place which had to be cleared was near the shore of the lake. As the Goth struck the heavy bushes with all his strength, the iron of his instrument, becoming detached from the handle, was cast into the lake. At this point the water was so deep that he had no hope of finding the lost tool. Seeing this, the Goth, all upset with fear, ran to the monk Maurus, told him of the damage he had done, and confessed his guilt before him. Maurus took care to notify the servant of God, Benedict. He, hearing the story, came himself to the lake and taking the handle from the hands of the Goth, he plunged it into the water. Instantly, from the bottom of the lake, the iron rose to the surface, and of itself was fitted again on the handle. Then Benedict gave the instrument to the Goth, saying to him, "Work now and be no longer sad."

The miracles of the repaired sieve, of the water gushing forth from the rocky cliff, of the thirteen pieces of gold given to the bankrupt debtor, of the child brought back to life and

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restored to his father, of the peasant delivered from the bonds of the cruel Zalla,<sup>15</sup> reveal to us in St. Benedict a heart entirely animated with sympathetic kindness. It seems that he loved men, his brethren, so sincerely that God was pleased to hear his prayer and to make the movement of his arm all-powerful.

Other accounts permit us to catch a glimpse of the kindness of St. Benedict under a special and very familiar aspect; for those close to him the kindness of the holy Patriarch goes as far as tenderness, a serious tenderness which befits his recollected character.

This disposition of soul is insinuated rather than affirmed in the narrations of St. Gregory. It is a secondary detail but its consideration is important to obtain a complete picture of the character of St. Benedict, so great and at the same time so truly human.

Little Placid had gone to draw water from the lake and the weight of the vessel which he carried had pulled him into the water. The current was drawing him out into the deep when Maurus, prompt to obey the call of St. Benedict, ran immediately and, miraculously walking on the water, saved the child of predilection. A friendly discussion followed. The humble Maurus wished to see in the prayer of his Abbot the real cause of the divine intervention. St. Benedict, on the other hand, pleased with the prompt obedience of the young Maurus—we

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know from the holy Rule how much the holy Patriarch cherished obedience rendered without delay—attributed the miracle not to his own merits but to the virtue of the young religious.

The friendly argument continued. Then, according to the account of St. Gregory,<sup>16</sup> the rescued boy intervened to be judge of this touching conflict of humility between the master and the disciple. "When I was drawn out of the water," he said, "I saw above my head the mantle of Father Abbot."

In this little familiar scene do we not feel, besides the simple joy for the safety of the boy rescued from the water, how much St. Benedict loved his sons and was pleased to converse with them, in all paternal dignity without doubt, but also with all simplicity and tenderness of affection?

But this grave and tender attitude of St. Benedict's soul shows itself nowhere more strikingly than in the account of his last visit with his sister, St. Scholastica.<sup>17</sup> Once only in the year St. Benedict went down to visit his sister in religion. This virgin had been devoted to God from her infancy, and she enjoyed very much this holy day which her brother consecrated to her. Together they prayed and praised the Lord. During the day the sister of Benedict eagerly gathered from the lips of her brother, words which inflamed her with divine love. Towards evening they took their refectio. As

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the hour advanced, the holy woman addressed this wish to her brother: "I beg you not to leave me this night, that we may speak until morning of the joys of the life of heaven." Benedict answered her: "What are you saying, my sister? I can by no means remain outside the monastery."

The heavens were then so clear that there was not in the sky any trace of a cloud. The pious virgin, hearing the refusal of her brother, placed her hands on the table and hid her face therein to pray to the all-powerful God. At the instant when she raised her head there was such a flash of lightning and thunder, such a deluge of rain, that the venerable Benedict and the brethren who had accompanied him were not able to cross the doorstep of this place where they were. The man of God, in the midst of this lightning and thunder and of these torrents of rain, saw indeed that he could not return to his monastery and with great sadness he complained: "May Almighty God pardon you; what have you done, my sister?" She answered him: "I besought you and you would not hear me; then I prayed to my Lord and He has heard me: now go out if you can, leave me and return to your monastery!" But Benedict could not leave the shelter, and he who had refused to remain willingly saw himself forced to remain against his will. Thus it happened that they watched together all night, satiating themselves

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with words of the spiritual life which they addressed to one another.

Three days later the virgin died, and Benedict, in spirit, saw her soul under the form of a dove ascending to heaven. Having loved his sister tenderly, he had her placed in the tomb which he had prepared for himself, "in order," adds St. Gregory, "that those who had but one soul in God might not have for their bodies but one and the same sepulcher."<sup>18</sup>

The kindness of St. Benedict manifests itself under yet another form, that of generous forgiveness of offenses. The Dialogues of St. Gregory have preserved for us a scene, very sketchily drawn, but of touching beauty.<sup>19</sup>

Benedict was en route with his disciples, leaving Subiaco and going towards Monte Cassino. He was fleeing from the hate of an unhappy man who, in order to persecute him, was attempting to bring ruin to the souls of his sons. But God permitted that in this very moment, by the sudden collapsing of his house, the perverse man was struck by death. When Benedict heard this he began to weep, giving great sighs of sadness, as much because of the death of his enemy, St. Gregory tells us, as because Maurus, his disciple, had dared to show signs of joy at this sad news. The account adds that St. Benedict inflicted a penance on the young monk who had rejoiced at another's misfortune.



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We shall not stop to consider many other examples of kindness scattered through the account of St. Benedict's life. Altogether they suggest to us how great and charming was that virtue in our holy Patriarch. It may be said in conclusion that many other narrations of St. Gregory reveal to us the kindness of the Saint under yet another aspect, that of courtesy in receiving guests. We have already noted how paternally he received the brethren complaining to him of having to obtain water so far from the monastery.

The priests in the vicinity of the grotto of Subiaco brought to the hermit some material nourishment, and they returned, according to St. Gregory, *carrying in their breasts food of life received from his lips.*<sup>20</sup>

St. Benedict knew how to listen with sympathy to the complaints of all; he adapted himself condescendingly to the needs of the peasants in the country, as well as those of the patricians of Rome. The radiance of a profound kindness rendered the man of God easily approachable.

*Fidelity to Observance.* St. Gregory says of St. Benedict:<sup>21</sup> "He wrote a rule for monks remarkable above all for discretion and very clear in its enunciations; if then anyone wishes to know better his manner of life he will find in the directions given by this rule what was the whole conduct of this Master, for this holy

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man could not teach otherwise than he himself lived."

Concerned especially with the narration of the miracles of St. Benedict, the great Pontiff did not try to show in detail the happenings which would manifest the love of the Saint for integral monastic observance. This essential aspect of his moral physiognomy, of capital interest for us, has been neglected. We find, however, in some places of the Dialogues vestiges of this love of the holy Legislator for the faithful observance of The Rule.

In the scene of the conversation with St. Scholastica the opposition of the Saint, caused by the inopportune request of his sister, and the pain that he felt in seeing himself, because the downpour of rain, unable to return to his monastery, are certainly indications of his love of observance.

The sanctity of Benedict and his spirit of contemplation did not prevent him from giving himself to the occupations prescribed for the monks by the rule. The Dialogues show him to us returning from the fields with his sons, occupying himself in establishing the plans for the erection of a new monastery, receiving pilgrims or visitors, and at other times sitting alone and reading.<sup>22</sup>

It was forbidden to those monks who left the monastery for some hours to eat anything out-

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side without special permission. Now some brethren who had set out on a journey, had taken the liberty, on their way back, to enter a house on the invitation of a pious woman. They succumbed to the temptation of partaking of a little food and then returned late to the monastery. St. Benedict, enlightened supernaturally, knew of their fault. He reproached them severely for this violation of the Holy Rule, but then, continues St. Gregory, seeing their repentance and knowing it to be sincere, he pardoned the fault committed.

The Rule also forbade the appropriation of anything without the authorization of the Abbot. Now some brothers having received handkerchiefs as a gift from the hands of certain good Sisters, kept them without informing their spiritual Father. St. Benedict reproached them severely for this fault contrary to monastic poverty.

In the account of St. Gregory the holy Patriarch often appears to us as being jealous of strict observance. He does not tolerate violations of the spirit of renouncement and poverty. He does not permit the cellarer to follow his own will and to neglect the order of his Abbot. Neither does he allow a religious, whatever be the conditions of his birth, to harbor thoughts of murmuring. "Make the sign of the cross on your heart," said St. Benedict to a brother who murmured interiorly. He was rigorous also a-

gainst the demon of inconstancy, who enticed a brother away from the exercise of silent prayer which was customary after the divine office had been said.<sup>24</sup>

The observance of the Rule and of its multiple prescriptions is not to the Legislator of monks the ceremonious satisfaction of a meticulous spirit. If he insists on fidelity to the Rule, it is because it is, to his eyes, the means *par excellence* of fixing the soul wholly in God. Besides this life of continued union with the Lord everything else appeared to St. Benedict as nothing.

*Simplicity and Greatness:*—St. Benedict had to bear in himself the imprint of a sovereign dignity, of an irresistible influence. The account of the arrival of the king Totila at Monte Cassino manifests with striking clearness this incontestable authority, this characteristic greatness of the Saint. "This scene," writes Montalembert, "shows, in their most brilliant personification, the two principal elements of the nascent society: the victorious barbarians and the invincible monks."<sup>25</sup>

The conquering barbarian, according to the word of St. Gregory, had heard of the man of God, and, when he passed near to Monte Cassino with his troops—probably when he went to besiege Naples—he wished to try for himself the prophetic spirit of the Saint. He made one of his riders precede, clothed in the royal gar-

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ments, in order to lead the Saint into error, but Benedict quickly discovered the deceit.

The next day Totila in person climbed the heights of Monte Cassino. When he reached the monastery and saw the Saint, he was filled with fear and prostrated himself. Benedict, with kindness, at once approached to raise him up. When he reproached him for his crimes and made this prophecy to him: "You are doing much evil, you have done very much—moderate at least your sins. Indeed you will enter Rome, you will cross the sea, you will reign nine years, and you will die during the tenth." St. Gregory notes that these things happened according to the word of the Saint.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of his sovereign authority, in spite of his patriarchal majesty, Benedict is simple. Simplicity is an amiable disposition of the soul, the fruit of humility and charity; it causes man to consider himself not as being above other men but as being on the same level with all.<sup>27</sup> How many scenes in the life of St. Benedict leave us under the charm of a clear and sweet simplicity!

As a young hermit hidden in his grotto,<sup>28</sup> he humbly receives his pittance of bread in a basket, let down by a long cord from the height of the rock, while a little bell announces the arrival of the simple repast.

Follow the account of an Easter morning in complete, silvestral solitude. With what cour-

tesy Benedict, separated from men and even ignorant of the feast itself, receives the priest whom God sends him to make him break his fast! What charm in the conversation! What simplicity in the meeting! "Indeed I know that today is Easter," says St. Benedict, "since I have the good fortune to see you."

Let us recall that the Saint had a crow to which he gave food every day and let us listen to him speaking softly to his familiar bird, commanding it to take in its mouth a poisoned loaf and to place it where no one would find it.<sup>29</sup>

In each one of the miracles that he works we see him, according to the accounts of St. Gregory, uniting the greatest simplicity to a calm dignity. In all the details of kindness already mentioned, is not this tenderness for his own, this fidelity to the Rule—are not these indications of that profound and Christian simplicity of the Patriarch which drew to him all sympathy?

*The Power of Organization.*—There is another quality of St. Benedict, a quality primarily of the natural order, which seems to us to constitute one of the principal aspects of his human genius: it is his power of organization.

The Legislator of monks by his nature was of a positive character, a realist, concerned more with the practical than with theoretical speculation. His genius was indeed Roman and far from the more exclusive contemplative tenden-



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cies of the ascetics of the East. To judge according to the pictures traced by St. Gregory, the life that he wishes to organize, whether at Subiaco or at Monte Cassino, is composed of prayer and work: the active life and the life of prayer are there united in an harmonious equilibrium. The monastic city that he organizes is a city of prayer and of asceticism, but it is also a city of work. Monte Cassino is the holy mountain where everyone works. This activity appeared essential to the life of the monks, just as application to prayer itself. The reading of the pages of St. Gregory does not give one the feeling that work was understood at Monte Cassino as a means of passing the time, destined to occupy a certain space between the hours of Divine Office. On the contrary, it appears as an arduous labor, done usually in common, that is, in fraternal collaboration, and ruled by obedience.

This work is of very different kinds: here it is work in the fields, again that of construction or of clearance; it is the reception of pilgrims or guests, the education of children; it is—outside the abbey—the care of souls or the conversion of pagans. The practice of nearly all the kinds of activity that the disciples of St. Benedict have exercised in the course of the centuries of their history, is found already mentioned in the accounts of the monastic life traced by St. Gregory. In the course of time the kind

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of work will change and become more intellectual and especially sacerdotal; but the organization dividing the day of the life of the monk between prayer in common and work will remain always the ideal towards which the efforts and monastic reforms will tend. The work of the Benedictine will have then as a normal framework the life of liturgical prayer, and it will be one part of the ascetical life which he has vowed.

Let us remark again that the work of the disciples of Saint Benedict, as it appears in the writing of St. Gregory, is the radiance of an activity of which the abbey is the center. The individualism of the worker is absorbed by the anonymity of the abbey which, through its sons, exercises its influence. Certainly it would be a manifest exaggeration to pretend that St. Benedict wished to organize the monastic life with the primary purpose of founding a school of the apostolate or a civilizing center; but on the other hand it would be equally wrong to think that the only social influence admitted for the abbey by the holy Patriarch was that of intercession with God by means of prayer. The conciliating spirit of St. Benedict has united these views. By insinuating the abbey to be a school of personal apprenticeship of the service of God, the holy Legislator has in fact organized it in a way to permit the exercise of a social influence both by prayer and by the various activities of the monks.

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Separated by fifteen centuries from the time of St. Benedict, we who still love this organization of life, in which prayer, asceticism and work harmonize usefully for the good of the Church and of society, feel that we are in continuity of thought with the primitive Benedictine ideal, and true brothers of those disciples of old who were gathered around the venerable patriarch at Monte Cassino. We may then conclude that in the accounts of St. Gregory the physiognomy of St. Benedict is apparent in its full and calm majesty. The dominating trait of his character is essentially religious. Closed to temptations from lower nature, the soul of St. Benedict, serious from infancy, tends directly towards the majesty of God. Nothing human or terrestrial counts when it is a question of the divine. The ascending movement of his soul is powerful and would break every obstacle. Benedict is eminently a man of prayer, favored by graces of prayer, irradiations of divine light. Nevertheless, his contemplative soul keeps a contact of love with the miseries and preoccupations of all his sons. He knows how to stoop to them with a sympathetic kindness, with a grave and affectionate tenderness. "One cannot make a good physiognomy," Pascal has written, "excepting in harmonizing all our contrarities."<sup>30</sup> The physiognomy of St. Benedict, more than any other, is made of qualities apparently opposed, but balancing one another: he is con-

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templative, living from the divine, and yet he remains eminently a man, not only by his kindness, but also by a faithful attachment to his daily duties, by the humble simplicity with which he holds himself on the same level with all. His gift of organizing brings out the strength of his natural qualities.

A final detail of character ought yet be noted. From the pages of St. Gregory comes the clear impression that the soul of the Patriarch, at the same time holy and human, lived as enveloped in a calm atmosphere of peace. In this soul, essentially well-balanced, where the tender and the strong, the simple and the grave, the love of work and of prayer are so excellently united, there reigned a profound peace, the peace of a man who knows that he is united to God and feels himself strong and mild through the inner power that he has from on high.

The peace that St. Benedict loved was certainly that which results from removal from the noises of the world. He loved the quiet of the narrow and deep valley of Subiaco, the sovereign calm of the summit of the holy mountain: the peace of Monte Cassino. But there is another peace than that of the hermits: it depends only on God and the soul. St. Augustine defines it "the tranquility of order."<sup>31</sup> It results from truth, from true goods, from justice, from all that which we have done and are—in ourselves and before God. This interior peace, gift

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of the Holy Ghost, ruled sovereignly in the soul of St. Benedict. It summarizes the supreme interior harmony of this profound and fertile existence.

### NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of his second book St. Gregory attests that his writing is the expression of local monastic traditions. "I myself have not known all the actions (of Benedict) but the few that I relate I have received from four of his disciples: from Constantius, a very venerable man who succeeded Benedict in the government of his monastery; from Valentinian, who for many years was superior of the Lateran monastery; from Simplicius, the third successor of St. Benedict; and finally from Honoratus, who still keeps the cell where Benedict first dwelt." In the course of his account St. Gregory cites other persons: Exhilaratus, who as a child had known St. Benedict, St. Anthony, and Peregrinus (ch. 18, 24, 28). The great Pontiff is always careful to report only facts that are well attested.

<sup>2</sup> D. G. Morin, *Rev. Bened.*, 1922 *Bull. d'ancienne litt. chret. latine*, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> *Dialogues* book 2, ch. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *S. Th.* 2-2, q. 189, a. 1, ad 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Dialogues* book 2, ch. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 35.

<sup>9</sup> *S. Th.* 2-2, q. 180, a. 5, ad 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Dialogues*, book 2, ch. 35.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.2, ch. 17

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.2, ch. 16 & 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, book 2, ch. 16.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 1, 5, 27, 32, 31.

- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 7.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 33.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 34.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 8.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 1.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 36.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 31.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 12 & 19.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 28, 20, 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Montalembert, *Les moines d'Occident*, t. II, p. 31.
- <sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, ch. 15.
- <sup>27</sup> Cf. D. Morin, *L'idéal monastique*, ch. 9—Simplicity.
- <sup>28</sup> Cf. L'Ancre, Août 1924, *Silhouette morale de S. Benoit*, par A., Tellier.
- <sup>29</sup> Cf. ch. 1 & 8.
- <sup>30</sup> *Pensées*, 16, 12.
- <sup>31</sup> *De Civ. Dei*, 19, 13.



## CHAPTER THREE

### THE SPIRITUAL RELATION OF ST. BENEDICT AND ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

#### Summary:

Notable differences in the manner of the two Saints.—In what does the likeness of their spirituality consist? Testimony of Dom Mackey.

- I. *The sense of discretion.* Power of judgment. The role of the two Saints in the history of asceticism results above all from their sense of discretion. Details of the doctrine of St. Benedict. Of St. Francis de Sales.
- II. *The view of the soul directed primarily to God.* The work in which humility predominates, according to St. Benedict, love, according to St. Francis de Sales. Texts showing the doctrinal tendencies of St. Benedict. Of St. Francis de Sales.
- III. *Love, the generating principle of spiritual activity.* Part given by St. Benedict to love as the means out of which issues spiritual activity. Benedictine tradition: Hildemar, Louis de Blois. Important teaching of St. Francis on this point.
- IV. *The unifying character of the asceticism of obedience.* According to the two Saints the

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union of the soul is accomplished not only by way of prayer but also by way of obedience. The ascetical orientation of the Rule of St. Benedict deviates from that of the Fathers of the desert. St. Francis: Texts: the obedience of love—holy indifference—abandon—perfect conformity—Prayer of conformity.

V. *Sanctification through daily actions.* Particular insistence on the value of little virtuous actions according to St. Benedict. According to St. Francis de Sales.

VI. *The profound understanding of human nature in the spirituality of the two Saints.* Care for the truth, for conformity with our nature. Love of the work of creation, of the beautiful in St. Benedict. In St. Francis. Like principles in direction of souls. Urbanity.

### Conclusion:

The likeness of spirit is clearly evident. The liberty of spirit which characterizes the two spiritualities is another sign of it. Integral view of the physiognomy of St. Benedict. Vitality of ascetical doctrine of the holy Patriarch.

WE do not pretend to identify entirely the spirit of St. Benedict and that of St. Francis de Sales; too many peculiarities of time, of place, and of character diversify their moral personalities. St. Benedict has nothing of the careful, endearing, picturesque, harmonious style of St. Francis; his pen is rude, sober, legisla-

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tive. His religious sensibility is not overflowing with sweetness, with pious affections, with tender flights toward God. One can hardly discover one or the other place of the Rule where he allows us to see the affective side of his life of union with God. In the prologue he writes: "What is there sweeter, my beloved brethren, than the voice of the Lord calling us?" On the other hand one could hardly find a single page in St. Francis where the overflowing sweetness of his interior life does not reveal itself by some pious effusion.

The one legislates for monks; he seeks preciseness. The other addresses his teaching especially to cultured women of refinement and education, living either in the world or in religion. He repeats himself a hundred times in his letters of direction, in his treatises on the devout life and the love of God.

The manner of presenting spiritual doctrine differs in these two Saints as much as the Roman and semi-barbarian society of the sixth century differs from the French society of open allurements, but instructed and polished, of the end of the sixteenth and of the beginning of the seventeenth centuries.

St. Francis in the devout life willingly introduces some pious ingenuities: he loves the right recitation of the rosary, he holds fast to the hours fixed for prayer. He was acquainted with a fixed method for becoming recollected and for

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making the examination of conscience and he wished to see Philothea join pious confraternities. St. Benedict is not acquainted with these devout practices, not that he opposes them, but those for whom he wrote did not feel the need of them, and the simple life, lived in the presence of God, reading, the psalms repeated without ceasing, the observance of silence and of peace took the place of the modern pious practices.<sup>1</sup>

The Bishop of Geneva tends to systematize all his teaching by grouping it exclusively around the practice of holy love. St. Benedict was not acquainted with the simplified theory. According to his spirituality it was indeed necessary to live by love, but the fear of God and his judgments count for much. We must not, however, believe that there is here a radical opposition between the two spiritualities. St. Francis also appreciates greatly, for example, meditation on the last things.

Finally our two Saints differ again in the fact that St. Benedict, in writing, thinks of organizing a social center; he addresses himself to an assembly and it is this life in common that he intends to regulate. St. Francis on the other hand, writes especially to organize the devout life for certain souls which he has in mind. He is *par excellence* the director of individual souls. But let us not exaggerate: St. Benedict addressing himself to a group knows well how at the same time to touch, correct, and direct individ-

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ual souls, and St. Francis has organized in an excellent way the life of his dear daughters of the Visitation.

After having shown these differences of mentality between our two Saints, let us see how by certain skilled orientations of their spirituality they reveal to us a mutual resemblance, not only by a certain similarity that one may easily find in all the Saints by reason of the Christian foundation on which their lives have been based, but by a real affinity or likeness of spirit due to their mentality or personal character.

We will group our views on this likeness of spirit in these six points: sense of discretion; the attention of the soul fixed primarily on God; love, the generating principle of spiritual activity; the unitive asceticism of obedience; sanctification through the ordinary actions of the day; profound understanding of human nature.

Before commencing our subject we wish to recall in grateful remembrance the humble and learned Benedictine of Douay, Dom Mackey, who twenty years ago, while visiting the abbey of Maredsous, was asked by Dom Hildebrand de Hemptinne, then abbot, to explain to us during a Sunday conference something of the method followed and of the results obtained in the critical editions of the works of St. Francis de Sales. He told us how, in obedience, he had, in a way, left St. Benedict to live at Annecy and to collaborate in the work of the Visitation religious.

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Two points of this conference were especially impressed in the memory of the young monks. The first was the clear affirmation that no modern saint, no ascetical writer approached so closely in spirit our holy Father St. Benedict as the holy Bishop of Geneva. It is this thought of Dom Mackey, the memory of which has so often returned to us, which has inspired this present study. The second point imprinted in our memory is the fact that the laborious and pious religious had touched and seen all the autographs of St. Francis still existing. Each time he said, that at Annecy, at the workshop of the Visitation Sisters, we receive a manuscript of the Saint, we immediately kneel down together to read and compare it with all respect.<sup>2</sup>

### I. SENSE OF DISCRETION

The spirituality of St. Benedict is characterized by discretion. The holy Patriarch loves the right measure, the middle way, the true norm, capable of lasting. St. Gregory the Great says of him: "He wrote a rule for monks remarkable especially for discretion."<sup>3</sup> If discretion is primarily a virtue of judgment which disposes a man to judge rightly in adapting the principles and commandments to the concrete capabilities of each one,<sup>4</sup> it is necessary to recognize that the characteristic of the role of St. Benedict and of St. Francis de Sales in the history of Christian asceticism was an influence of discretion.



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The one in the sixth century, the other at the beginning of the seventeenth have known how to pick out of the complex heritage of examples and doctrines of traditional asceticism, the practical way in which their contemporaries could live from the teaching of the past. They have detached the essentials of the spiritual life from certain less important elements considered by men then as necessarily connected with the search after sanctity. Consequently they have proposed to their contemporaries the traditional doctrine, renewed however in a certain sense by a work of discernment of values and of practical adaptation.

Before St. Francis of Sales, there was a tendency to consider a devout life as incompatible with the married state, life in the world, and the occupations which usually accompany it. It was thought not to be made for those who lived *in villas, in houses, in the court.*<sup>5</sup> By a work full of discretion, St. Francis traces for Philothea a program of life for attaining to the perfection of holy love without vows, nor religious habit, nor the material forsaking of the world, nor retreat behind the grilles of a convent.

Similarly St. Benedict relaxes nothing of the learned asceticism of the Fathers of the desert, of the rules of St. Pachomius and of St. Basil. As to charity, obedience, the spirit of prayer, humility, the spirit of renunciation of the goods of this world and of oneself, his prescriptions

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diminish nothing. On the other hand, in all that does not belong basically to Christian asceticism, the rules concerning food, the length of prayer, the diversity of work, the care of instruction, the use of baths, in all these things the Rule of St. Benedict is unbelievably more condescending than that of his predecessors. By it the asceticism of the Fathers of the East was transmitted to the Latin monastic communities under a form accommodated to their capabilities and to the requirements of their education. One may truthfully say of St. Benedict what was recently written of St. Francis de Sales: he knew how "to temper all without weakening anything."<sup>6</sup> But that which shows yet better the similarity of spirit or mentality between the two Saints is not only the fact of having adapted the principles to the good wills of the men of their times, but to have had in their spiritual teaching the same tendency of constantly recalling thoughts of discretion. Their spirit is on the watch to forewarn their disciples against any lack of prudence. Their ascetic doctrines are, above all, enemies of excess.

Whether St. Benedict treats of the administration of the monastery or of the direction of souls he keeps uppermost in mind the idea of a *just measure*. *Let the Abbot*, he writes, *be provident and considerate*. For Benedict *discretion is the mother of virtues*. When he fixes the norms common to all he remarks immediate-

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ly that the Abbot may and ought to judge of the fitness of exceptions and of the just distribution of everything according to the needs of each one: the one has a special need that the other has not, *unus sic, alius vero sic*.<sup>8</sup> St. Benedict also teaches that it is necessary to *moderate all things so that those who are strong may desire to do more and those who are weak may not be discouraged*.<sup>9</sup>

He is persuaded that the guidance of men is a difficult task, and that it demands on the part on the spiritual Father *an adaptation corresponding to the diversity of characters*.<sup>10</sup> According to this diversity of characters St. Benedict teaches that it is necessary to have recourse to persuasion of the intellect, fear of chastisement, encouragement with kind words and love and to choose the opportune moment in order to obtain very efficacious results. These remarks of the Saint are significant of his constant preoccupation to avoid every lack of adaption and every excess.

It is the same for corrections; the Patriarch knew how to be very severe, but he recommends *to correct only with prudence, avoiding all excess*. Not that he should permit vices to become rooted in the monastery, but it is necessary to combat them with all prudence and charity, in the measure fitting each one.<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes in his Rule St. Benedict announces certain rather rigid principles: *the life of the*

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*monk should be a continual Lent; or again; wine is not the drink for monks.*<sup>12</sup> But immediately in the context he indicates a milder practice as being better adapted to community life. This announcing of the principle demanding the ideal and this condescendence, not demanding its full realization, when the essence of Christian perfection is not at stake, appears to us to be a detail which reveals the perfect spirit of moderation of the holy legislator.

This same spirit of discretion which, in St. Benedict, seems to be the mature fruit of reflected thought, appears in St. Francis de Sales with a charm of spontaneity seeming to require no consideration.

"The Bishop of Geneva," writes M. Vincent, "is essentially a reasonable genius and a conciliating genius...reason, moderation, good sense rule all his teaching. Excess, scarcity, subtlety, the affected, the Romanesque are inexorably banned from his doctrine. If there is in him fastidious refinement as in Montaigne or Racine, or superfluous finery of language, it does not affect the substance of things and of the soul."<sup>13</sup>

In the whole work of the Saint, but especially in his letters, we taste the charm of a discretion at the same time delicate, easy, and extremely useful to sanctification. To a lady more zealous than considerate, but ardent for the acquisition of virtues, he wrote: "Love nothing too much,

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I beseech you, not even the virtues, which one loses sometimes by going too far.”<sup>14</sup>

Consulted by her in regard to Holy Communion, the Saint wrote again, “if it is not in accord with the will of your husband, do not exceed for the present . . . communicate spiritually; God will accept the preparation of our heart. Do honor to our devotion; make it amiable to all who know you but especially to your family.”<sup>15</sup>

To souls less ardent, subjected to discouragement the Saint adapts his teaching on spiritual progress: “We must all have the desire of attaining the height of virtue but we must not lose courage when we do not attain immediately the essence of virtue nor should we be dissatisfied, provided that we do our best.”<sup>16</sup>

To a young mother, depressed because of the expectation of a family difficulty, the Saint writes: “Do not put yourself in misery by forcing yourself to any kind of exercise. If you are tired on your knees, sit down; if you have not enough attention to pray half an hour, pray a quarter of an hour. I beg you to put yourself in the presence of God and to bring your sorrows before Him . . . Do not worry that you do not perform well the acts of the virtues, because they are still very good even though they are done without fervor, tardily, and as it were, through force. You can give nothing to God except what you have. Do not torment yourself

by trying to do a great deal, but dispose yourself to suffer with love that which you suffer.”<sup>17</sup>

In the correction of faults St. Francis never intends to depart from wise discretion. He writes to an Abbess to work at the reform of her monastery “...with all sweetness and moderation. It is necessary to have a long-winded heart, and to mix kindness with justice, like the good God, in order that charity may be exercised and discipline observed.”<sup>18</sup>

In the conversion of heretics the manner of St. Francis is all sweetness, penetrating and prudent. Here is how he lets us see it in an Italian letter cited and translated by M. Faguet: “There is in this town a great gate opened to the most holy crucifix...It is necessary to do as we do during Holy Week: uncover one arm of the cross, then the other, and finally the entire cross, and chant sweetly: *come let us adore.*”<sup>19</sup>

Discreet in his contacts with souls the holy Bishop is so likewise as a writer. He writes in the preface of the *Treatise On The Love of God*: “Certainly I had in consideration the condition of the spirit of this world, and I should have had; it is very important to consider in what age one writes.”

We have seen that St. Benedict attributed to discretion the title of *mother of virtues*. Being of the very same opinion, St. Francis makes his own the word of St. Anthony the Hermit:



"Briefly, and as I have often told you, discretion is a virtue without which no virtue is a virtue, not even devotion."<sup>20</sup>

The sense of discretion or of right measure appears to us to be the first detail of likeness binding the mentality of the two Saints. This judicious discernment of old gave the principal value to their spiritualities, and even today, after so many centuries, it is to the spirit of discretion that the doctrine of the two Saints owes its lasting vitality.

## II. THE VIEW OF THE SOUL, DIRECTED PRIMARILY TO GOD

Permeating the whole spirituality of St. Benedict and of St. Francis de Sales is a tendency to make the soul fix its gaze preferably and primarily on God rather than on itself. Neither of these two Saints has drawn up this doctrine under the form of an absolute thesis, as Cardinal de Berulle and his disciples of the oratory did in the seventeenth century,<sup>21</sup> but it is the result of the whole of their teaching. The gaze of the soul being turned first of all towards God and His holy will, the search for personal perfection will be the sequence of this regard of humble love or of loving humility towards the Lord. For St. Benedict as for St. Francis it is because the soul applies itself principally and without ceasing to the remembrance of God and

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of His love that it will apply itself, without becoming lax, to cultivate the interior garden.

The moralism of the two doctrinal systems, that is to say, the whole of the ascetic and moral conduct that they prescribe, will then be the effect of an attitude of soul in which God takes the lead in all.

The spirituality of the two Saints, by reason of this skilled orientation which is common to both, differs then from a spirituality, theoretically very different, of which the dominating idea would be to attach the gaze of the soul especially to the "culture of the ego," culture which seems only "capable to give to God in part the honor which He expects from His creature."<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless the Salesian spirituality and that of the Benedictine Rule are not without having each its particular character.

The gaze of the soul towards God, which St. Benedict considers as dominating and commanding the entire interior life, is above all a gaze of humility; that to which St. Francis attaches his spirituality is especially an attention of love; but the two spiritualities resemble one another profoundly, for in the thought of St. Benedict, the word *humility* denotes less a virtue considered apart than a sincere attitude of the soul before God. This attitude comprises, no doubt, fear, respect, and filial submission, but it implies also much pure searching for God.

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Patience, interior truth, abandon of self to the action of the Holy Ghost, charity are essential to it. In the course of the degrees of humility such or such a point will be especially recommended, but humility and charity always penetrate one another. St. Francis expresses the same idea when he says: "charity is an ascending humility, and humility is a descending charity."<sup>23</sup>

See how St. Benedict conceives the skilled orientation of the soul: "The first degree of humility is to keep always the fear of God before one's eyes, avoiding all forgetfulness. Let the monk think always of that which God ordains, how those who despise the Lord condemn themselves to hell, and what is the eternal life which God has prepared for those who fear Him as children. It is necessary that one constantly return to these thoughts, and that keeping himself from sin at all times... he realize that he is always under the eye of God."<sup>24</sup>

It is evident that, according to the holy Patriarch, one's gaze on the Lord should dominate one's whole life; it is as a secret power which tends to rule and to transform the moral activity of man in order to make it what it ought to be before God. The more this divine idea fills one's life in practice, the more one advances in the understanding of his dependence and of his nothingness. His obedience will be more profound and he will give himself with more

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abandon to the paternal love of God. It is thus, as St. Benedict tells us, that the twelve degrees of humility will conduct man to the plenitude of charity, thanks to the fertile action of the Holy Ghost.<sup>25</sup>

In other places of the Rule<sup>26</sup> we find this same orientation of thought. St. Benedict wishes that the Abbot have his eye fixed on the just judgments of God. In this case he will be more conscious of his responsibility as pastor of the sheep of the Lord who have been confided to him. The gaze of faith on the God of all majesty ought equally, according to St. Benedict, to inspire and regulate the entire attitude of the soul which prays, whether it be the Divine Office or private prayer.

In deciding one's monastic vocation, it is again a first orientation of the soul towards the Lord and His holy will—the *search after God*—which appears to the holy Patriarch the surest manifestation of a divine call. Of the four conditions that he requires in judging of the fitness of a man for the monastic life, it is this search after God which he puts in first place, before the zeal for obedience, zeal for Divine Office and for the acceptance of humiliations.

Briefly, the respectful attention to God, or in other words, the fear of God, is considered by St. Benedict as the habitual and serious foundation of the whole interior life. He recommends it to the Abbot as well as to the monks, to the

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guestmaster, to the cellarer, and to whomsoever is animated with good zeal. This so frequent recalling of fear of God introduces into Benedictine spirituality a note of gravity with which the doctrine of St. Francis, less influenced by the tragic aspect of life, is not so penetrated.

For St. Francis of Sales it is especially by love that the gaze of the soul must be fixed on the Lord: "As those who have a human and natural love have nearly always their thoughts turned towards the thing loved...thus those who love God cannot cease to think of Him, sigh for Him, aspire to Him, speak of Him..."

"Aspire then often to God, Philothea, give Him your soul a thousand times a day, fix your interior eyes on His sweetness, give Him your hand, as a little child to its father, in order that He may lead you... Our spirit, abandoning itself to the intercourse, privacy, and familiarity of its God, will perfume itself entirely with His perfections."<sup>27</sup>

That is why the Saint is pleased to propose as an example of the interior life that of the holy King David, manifesting itself marvellously through "The transports sown so thickly in the psalms."

The transports cited by the Saint, suppose clearly that the gaze of the soul fixes itself above all on God: "I see my God always before me. I have raised my eyes to thee, O my God,

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who dwellest in heaven. My eyes are always on God."<sup>28</sup>

The Saint loves the virtue of simplicity because by it the soul "gazes directly at God without ever allowing any mixture of self-interest... God alone finds place there."<sup>29</sup>

Elsewhere it appears in many ways how much this confiding gaze of love fixed preferably on God rather than on any other object, is the dominating trait of his spirituality.

"It pleases God that we consider very little the condition of the road we travel and that we have our eyes fixed on Him who leads us and on the happy country to which He leads us."<sup>30</sup>

Because he loves the gaze of the soul on God, St. Francis is not tempted to give too much time to considering the *ego*. He professes not to like those who in prayer and elsewhere are "turning back... wishing to see all and to examine minutely all that passes within them... in order to recognize their advance."<sup>31</sup> "Whoever is anxious to please the heavenly Lover has neither the heart nor the leisure to turn back on himself."<sup>32</sup>

One must not believe, however, that the Saint preached negligence of personal effort and lack of all care for the spiritual perfection of self. He wishes us to cultivate the garden of the soul, to desire progress in virtue, but without self-love, without excessive eagerness, and sub-



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ordinating this work to a primary will to please God, because this work of perfecting self ought to be the consequence of such a will. All the internal logic of the Saint's doctrine on benevolent love "which draws God within our hearts," which "throws into God our hearts, and consequently all our actions and affections,"<sup>33</sup> implies necessarily that the gaze of the one who loves be turned primarily towards the Lord. The same is to be said of his doctrine on the love of submission or of conformity which makes us have no other intention in all our actions than the desire to please God.<sup>34</sup> Care to cultivate the garden of the soul and to make progress in virtue will be then the immediate consequence of the perpetual attention of love.

St. Francis gives us this doctrine in a captivating page: "Spiritual lovers, spouses of the heavenly King, consider themselves from time to time, to see if they are acting according to the will of their Lover, and this takes place in examinations of conscience by which they cleanse, purify, and adorn themselves as best they can, not to be perfect, not to satisfy themselves, not to desire their progress in good, but to obey their Spouse, for the reverence they have for Him and for the great desire they have to satisfy him. They do not purify themselves to be pure, they do not adorn themselves to be beautiful, but only to please their Lover...the desire to love rather than to adorn themselves

and to prepare for love, takes away from them all curious solicitude.”<sup>35</sup>

## III. LOVE, GENERATING PRINCIPLE OF SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY

Another tendency common to the ascetic ways traced by St. Benedict and St. Francis de Sales is to give to the love of God a very preponderant importance, not only as the final goal of the ascetic effort but as being the generating principle of this effort. St. Francis has viewed everything from the point of view of the practice of holy love: “All is by love, in love, for love in holy church.”<sup>36</sup>

Indeed St. Francis did not invent this doctrine; almost all the leading ideas of the celebrated treatise are taken from the *Summa* of St. Thomas. He has, however, given to the exposition of traditional Catholic doctrine a turn so eminently practical, a sense so easy to understand, that his doctrine has seemed to many to be new.

St. Benedict has not written a whole unified doctrine in terms of love. He has recourse often to fear of God’s judgments, or to that of corporal chastisements to stimulate those who are nonchalant. The hope of heaven, the remembrance of holy profession should also stimulate the effort of the monks. But in virtue of many texts of his Rule, one can affirm that like St. Francis, he tends to see in love the most ex-

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cellent generating principle, the most powerful key of the whole spiritual life.

When the conditions of life are crucifying the religious and the orders received seem to him impossible to carry out, St. Benedict has recourse to love as to the supreme means which will help one to fight, to progress, and to conquer. In the chapter in which he describes what one's conduct should be in similar circumstances he writes: "Let the monk know that obedience will be advantageous to him, and let him obey out of love, trusting in the help of God."<sup>37</sup>

And again: "In every arduous and contrary thing, and even when it is necessary to endure crying injustice, it is necessary that the monk, keeping silence, hold the good by force of endurance...assured of the divine recompense... let him say: '...in all these difficulties we overcome because of Him who has loved us.'"<sup>38</sup>

In the ordinary circumstances of life St. Benedict wishes also that the good monk tend to make of love the stimulant or the generating principle of all his proceedings: "the third degree of humility is that *through love of God*, one submit himself in all obedience to the superior, imitating the Master who for us...made Himself obedient even unto death."<sup>39</sup>

This program of life expresses in concise terms the quintessence of the practice of holy love developed at length in the admirable pages of St. Francis.

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Not only is love the goal to which the twelve degrees of humility conduct the monk, but it is divine love which supports our progress in the spiritual life: "in going forward...it is with an *unspeakable sweetness of love* that one runs in the way of the divine precepts."<sup>40</sup>

The chapter on the Instruments of Good Works begins by recalling that great evangelical precept to love the Lord God with one's whole heart, with one's whole soul, with one's whole strength. To this text St. Benedict has added the words *in primis—above all*, to signify, as it were, that the other ascetic maxims in this chapter have no value except by reason of the practice of the initial precept.

One event in the life of St. Benedict, narrated by St. Gregory,<sup>41</sup> ought to be mentioned here. A hermit of his time, living in a cave in the Campagna, had chained himself so that he could not leave his place of retreat. Hearing of this St. Benedict said to him through a disciple: "If you are truly a servant of God let it not be a chain of iron that holds you, but the chain of Christ." The solitary obeyed and having his heart riveted to Christ by love he persevered freely in his penitent life. Do not these words of St. Benedict show that his preferences were for fidelity engendered and fed by the one power of love?

Cassian writes that the monk who has attained perfection will perform all his ascetic practices

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"not through fear...but by love of the good and the joy of virtue."<sup>42</sup> St. Benedict in his twelfth degree of humility is manifestly inspired by the text of Cassian, but he adds these two words: *amore Christi—by the love of Christ*. It seems to us that this action of the holy Patriarch evidently shows how the humble service of our fidelity to God ought to find in love its fertile principle.

The doctrine of St. Benedict is clearly expressed in these lines of Dom Columba Marmion: "The accomplishment of the Rule, through love, constitutes fidelity. Fidelity is the richest and most delicate flower of love here below. Above in heaven love flowers into thanksgiving, into complacency, into joy...here below it manifests itself by a generous and constant fidelity to God, in spite of the darkness of faith, in spite of trials, difficulties, contradictions."<sup>43</sup>

Benedictine tradition has not mistaken the preferences of St. Benedict. See how the Abbot Hildemar expresses himself in his commentary on these words of the Rule: "Prompt obedience befits those who hold nothing dearer than the love of Christ." The following is a summary of his doctrine. "The monk cannot serve God through fear as a slave, nor through desire of recompense as a mercenary, nor through pure fidelity to promise given as a vassal, but let him serve through love as a true son. It is not sufficient that the Abbot recommend that in



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general to all; it is necessary that in the particular conferences to their consciences he examine what motives stimulate the monk to faithful observance and that he admonish each one to live devoutly by the one virtue of love."<sup>44</sup>

The venerable Abbot, Louis de Blois, in the sixteenth century, insists on the same thought, though in other terms. He wishes that the monk find in the merits of Christ, that is, in a constant search for union with Christ through love, the means *par excellence* to stimulate himself and to offer pleasing actions to God: "If you unite your good works and your exercises to the works and exercises of Christ to present them to God... your lead, if I may speak thus, will turn into precious gold, your water into exquisite wine. Trust your good works and your exercises to the holiest and sweetest heart of Jesus that He may correct them and perfect them. Rejoice that, poor in yourself, you possess so many riches in your Redeemer."<sup>45</sup>

St. Francis de Sales loved the doctrine of this pious Benedictine. Having received the French translation of one of his works he wrote: "I had it read at table and have enjoyed it incredibly; I pray you to read it and relish it, for it is worth while."<sup>46</sup>

According to the teaching of St. Francis, that which God expects of us in our life is not the formal offering of a well cultured soul but it is above all the gift of a perpetual canticle of love:



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"the human heart is the true chanter of the canticle of holy love and it is itself the harp and the psalter."<sup>47</sup>

This divine charity, living in the center of the soul, is truly understood by him as the generating principle of all spiritual activity: "Love is the first act and principle of all spiritual life by which we live, feel, and move." It rules the whole moral conduct and gives it its supernatural value: "O how excellent are the acts of virtues when divine love impresses on them its holy movement... For it is charity which gives the weight to all that we do."<sup>48</sup>

Love is a force which presses man and constrains him interiorly to do good: "Yes, Theotime, nothing moves the heart of man so much as love. Love is the most pressing teacher and solicitor to persuade the heart to obey the will and intentions of the beloved. Love is a magistrate which exercises its power without noise, without soldiers, but by that mutual complacency by which, as we take pleasure in God, we desire reciprocally to please Him."<sup>49</sup>

The all-powerful action of love cannot exercise itself except by means of holy complacency. It opens the soul to the divine. On the one hand it expels from the heart the contentment that man takes in himself and in earthly goods: "Love is strong as death; death separates the soul from the body and from all the things of this earth; holy love separates the soul from the

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body and from all the things of the world... death does effectually what love does ordinarily by affection."<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand the complacency of holy love presses man so that he no longer aspires to anything except to please God by doing all things conformably to His holy will. It is the new life: "Whoever is raised up to this new life no longer lives to himself, nor for himself, nor in himself, but to his Savior, in his Savior, and for his Savior... and this new life is a living, vital, and vivifying life."<sup>51</sup>

In this state love is fully and royally the generating principle of all spiritual activity. Such is sanctity in Christ, so admirably described in Book VII of the *Treatise on the Love of God*.

Finally, when love has fully seized a soul, it takes from it all desire to choose anything else than that which God wills. It becomes thus in the interior of man the principle and guaranty of constant fidelity. It makes the will conformed to God's. St. Francis does not fear to write: "It is necessary that we have no other law nor constraint than that of love."<sup>52</sup>

This maxim effects the total victory of divine charity in the life of man. Like the saying of St. Augustine: "Love and do what you will,"<sup>53</sup> it does not pretend to free the Christian from the external constraint of divine and human

laws. It merely indicates that holy love transforms the heart which it takes possession of so that it can no longer love nor act otherwise than in perfect conformity with the holy will of God.

Like the chain of Christ of which St. Benedict spoke, divine charity, mistress of the soul, is an inner constraint, but it is nonetheless powerful in guiding man, protecting him, making sure his fidelity in the service of God.

#### IV. THE UNITIVE CHARACTER OF THE ASCETICISM OF OBEDIENCE

The spiritualities of St. Benedict and of St. Francis de Sales are alike also in a fourth fundamental tendency, that of attributing an extraordinary importance in the ascetic life to the struggle against self-will. Both recognize a unitive function in this obedience which implies entire submission of the human will to God.

The two Saints do not fail to understand the important role of prayer in uniting holy souls to God. They agree moreover, in seeing the effective conformity of the human will with that of God as the most essential basis of the whole life of union. This divine will, to which man must submit his activity, presents itself concretely to him under the form of the duties of his state and of the obligations that life im-

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poses, as well as the obedience ordained by the rules of religious and legitimate superiors. The act by which man accepts the divine order, whatever be the manner in which this is manifested to him, must certainly be referred to the moral virtue of obedience; but by reason of the theological virtue of charity, which inspires this act, the union of the soul with God must be referred to this virtue.

Indeed this doctrine on effective union is not developed by St. Benedict, as it is in the writings of St. Francis, but the Salesian exposé on holy indifference and perfect abandon so continues the thought to the Patriarch of monks that it seems to be an authentic and admirable amplification of it. Without exaggerating anything we can affirm that the mother-idea of the whole practice of the spirituality of St. Francis is contained in the short formula of St. Benedict, summarizing the effort of the monk's life in these words: *by the labor of obedience*.

Before our holy Patriarch, the asceticism of the Fathers of the desert knew, of course, obedience, but all their teaching was not habitually grouped around this virtue. For them asceticism tends strongly to withdraw the solitary from the material conditions of human life: hence the extreme importance attached to fasts and vigils. This asceticism of the anchorites tends also to free the spirit from earthly affections, thoughts, preoccupations and desires: hence the

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importance given to flight from men, to seeking after silence, to holy reading, and to much praying. Moral purity and union with God are thought to result from this group of exercises. In St. Benedict, on the contrary, the progressive path of the soul towards God is understood as having to be realized by an ever more complete conformity of the will with the holy will of God. The first four degrees of humility proposed by the Rule mark this progress of the soul, which, first of all, keeps itself free from sin, does not seek its own will, and then gives itself to live habitually in submission through love, thus entering into the status of interior strength which St. Benedict calls patience. This state of soul corresponds to that which St. Francis de Sales will later call *holy indifference*.

The rules of St. Pachomius and St. Basil, no less than the writings of Cassian, are not foreign to this way of considering the spiritual life: their asceticism forms, so to say, a transition from the conception of the anchorites to the asceticism of obedience which St. Benedict will firmly formulate.<sup>54</sup>

Note how, at the beginning of his Rule, the holy Patriarch expresses his synthetic thought on the spiritual life: "Hear, O my son, the precepts of the Master and lend the attention of thy heart; willingly receive the teaching of a loving Father and put it into practice: in order that *by the labor of obedience* you may



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return to Him from Whom you have turned away by the laxity of disobedience. To you then my word is addressed, to you who renounce your own will and take up the powerful and glorious *arms of obedience* in order to serve the Lord, Christ, our true King."

St. Benedict wishes this obedience to be complete and constant, ruling the whole life of the monk.<sup>55</sup> It is necessary that such a one *hate his own will*, that he remember *that he has no longer dominion over his will*, that he must *walk, led by the judgment and direction of another*. In the monastery let no one follow *his own will*. This good, which is obedience, the zealous monks ought to desire, not only submitting themselves to their Abbot, but even *obeying one another and vying with one another in obedience*.

For the holy Legislator obedience is certainly an ascetic exercise; in carrying out without the least delay the orders received the monk learns to overcome his will. Moreover, according to the thought of the holy Patriarch, the act of obedience has a unitive character, it is *par excellence* the act which binds and unites man to God. Apparently rendered to a superior, it is in truth to God that obedience leads and attaches the religious: *obedientia quae majoribus praebetur, Deo exhibetur*. The Rule wishes that the orders of the Abbot and those of the seniors be executed in this spirit of submission and of



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union with the Lord, *as if these orders had come from God himself*. St. Benedict deigns to propose to us the obedience of Our Lord Jesus Christ as a model to be imitated. He loves to recall to the monk that Christ has said: "I am not come into the world to do my own will but the will of Him who sent Me," and that St. Paul has summarized the life of the Savior in this verse: "He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." It is the love of Christ, preferred above everything else that ought to move the monk to obey promptly. According to the Patriarch obedience has a role which is sovereignly unitive. It constantly puts the soul in communion of faith with God or Christ. The union with God to which the Rule disposes souls is rather in the sphere of the will than in that of the intelligence; it orients the soul towards perfect conformity of will with God. Consequently this conception opposes the doctrine of the Augustinians and others who in the life of union give too great a place to the intellectual element.

"To lead us to God," writes Dom Marmion, "St. Benedict knew but one way: union with Christ in obedience."<sup>56</sup>

It is the unitive role of obedience that St. Francis de Sales also was pleased to show forth. The union to which he wishes to conduct souls results not only from recollection and prayer but especially from a loving submission, from

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holy indifference, from holy abandon and complete conformity.

According to the doctrine of St. Francis, the soul, applying itself in every circumstance to a loving obedience or submission of will, binds itself in the way of holy indifference and complete abandon. Thanks to this state of abandon, the will of man tends to lose itself in God, entering into perfect conformity with Him.

Let us cite some texts of the Saint to obtain a better grasp of his excellent doctrine. Concerning the constant application that one must have in every circumstance to subject oneself lovingly according to the divine pleasure, he expresses himself thus: "It is necessary to consider what God wishes, and recognizing it, do it joyfully or at least courageously...it is necessary to love this will and the obligation which flows from it. This is the height of perfection to which we must all look...<sup>57</sup> As soon as the good pleasure of the divine majesty makes its appearance one must immediately set himself to obey it lovingly."<sup>58</sup>

The habit of obedience through love establishes the soul in the state of holy indifference and abandon. "Indifference loves nothing except for the love of God's will."<sup>59</sup> One must not ask for anything nor refuse anything, but leave himself entirely in the arms of divine providence, without trifling with any desire except to will that which God wills concerning us...All

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our perfection lies in the practice of this point.”<sup>60</sup> “...conformity of our heart with that of God is realized when through holy benevolence we throw all our affections in the hands of the divine will in order that they may be bent and managed by his will, shaped and formed according to his good pleasure. And in this point consists the very profound obedience of love—submitting oneself to God solely for the most perfect good which is in Him, by reason of which He deserves that every will be obedient to Him...conforming and uniting itself forever, in all things, and everywhere to His divine intentions.”<sup>61</sup>

Finally, note how, thanks to holy indifference and abandon, the union between the soul and God is consummated: “To die is nothing else than to pass over the confines of this mortal life to go to the immortal. Of course our will can never die, no more than our spirit, but sometimes it passes beyond the limits of ordinary life to live in the divine will...it abandons itself totally and without reserve...being hidden with Christ in God, where it lives, no longer itself, but the will of God lives in it.... As the brightness of the stars...is swallowed up in the sovereign light of the sun, with which it is happily mixed and joined...the human will...is thus mixed with the will of God that it is no longer discernible and has no desire separate from that of God.”<sup>62</sup>

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The form of prayer towards which the doctrine of the *Treatise on the Love of God* orientates souls is that of a deep recollection in a conformity ever more perfect with the divine good pleasure. The most excellent prayer, says St. Francis, consists in "dwelling simply there where it pleases God that we be, and because it pleases Him that we be there...it is a good way to hold ourselves in the presence of God, to be and to will to be always in His good pleasure... This is the zenith of the ecstasy of love...not having one's pleasure in one's own will but in that of God."<sup>63</sup>

### V. SANCTIFICATION BY THE LITTLE ACTIONS OF THE DAY

The most ordinary actions made in a spirit of obedience and with love lead us to God; they lead us towards the perfection of union with Him. Such is the clear view of St. Francis; such is also the sense of all the teaching proposed by St. Benedict. In the reflected thought of the Patriarch, the good zeal proper to generous and fervent monks consists above all in the practise of what the Bishop of Geneva will call *the little virtues*.

One might easily imagine that the holy Legislator, consecrating a chapter of his rule to the "good zeal which the monks ought to have," would recommend ascetical practises recalling

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the austerity of the hermits of the Thebaid, such as fasts, vigils, prolonged psalmodies. He does nothing of the sort. Like St. Francis, later on, he discerns spiritual values in a way entirely different. Note how he expresses himself: "Let the monks attach themselves with a most ardent love to the practice of good zeal, that is, let them anticipate one another in showing marks of respect; let no one seek that which is useful to himself but rather that which is useful to another; let them render the duty of charity with a pure heart; let them fear God with love; let them love their Abbot with a humble and sincere affection; let them prefer absolutely nothing to Christ who may deign to lead us all together to eternal life."<sup>64</sup>

In his whole rule St. Benedict gives a similar judgment on the sanctifying value of ordinary actions performed with charity. To the brethren who prepare the meals, as to the infirmarian and to the cellarer, so often imposed upon, he recalls that divine charity increases by degrees, especially in these humble works. Finally the observance of the Rule appeared to him to be the way which surely leads to the tabernacle of God; or the series of exercises prescribed by the Rule is woven—in Salesian language—with *little actions and daily contradictions*.

In reading the following words of the Bishop of Geneva we will see once more how St. Benedict and St. Francis are in harmony in their



appreciation of the sanctifying value of humble and hidden actions. "Great works are not always in our path, but we can always do little things excellently, that is, with great love... as the bees draw from lilies, irises, and roses; but they do not gain less booty from the little flowers of rosemary and thyme...thus in humble and little exercises of devotion charity is practised not only more frequently but also, ordinarily, more humbly, and consequently more usefully and holily. These condescensions to the whims of another, this bearing of annoying ways and rude actions of one's neighbor... this benign and gracious reception that we make of contempt and censure of our actions: all this is more fruitful to our souls than we think, provided that divine love permeates them..."<sup>65</sup> "Let us travel through these low valleys of the little and humble virtues..."<sup>66</sup>

Of course this doctrine is not proper to St. Francis. We do not pretend that; but the insistence with which he recommends it authorises us, we believe, to establish between him and St. Benedict a similar tendency, born of the same practical orientation of their spirits.

## VI. THE PROFOUND UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN NATURE

The perfection of the service of God demanded by St. Benedict and the perfection of the devout life which St. Francis de Sales teaches is not



of an abstract kind, tainted with utopianism. These Saints did not intend to make of us quasi-angelic beings, but they tend to supernaturalize our human nature as it is, taking into account the capacities, obligations, and the perfection proper to the man himself. It is necessary to take us as we are and to seek to supernaturalize us while remaining in conformity with ourselves.

St. Francis writes to a lady: "It is not the property of roses to be white...but it is the property of the lily. Let us be what we are, and be it well, to do honor to the Master-worker. Do not desire to be what you are not but desire to be excellently that which you are; fix your thoughts on perfecting yourself in that and in carrying the crosses, big or small, which you meet... Of what use is this building castles in Spain when you must live in France? It is my old lesson..."<sup>67</sup>

St. Benedict thinks the same way.<sup>68</sup> It is necessary that each thing be what it is *hoc sit quod dicitur*. He has no use for the monks who *lie to God by their tonsure*. He wishes that before one has himself called holy he should be so in reality in order, he adds, that one may be so called with truth.

It is this desire of truth or of conformity with nature which causes St. Benedict to insist on the practice of the moral virtues. He teaches that monastic perfection includes the qualities which make an upright man. The prologue of

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the Rule, the chapter on the instruments of good works abound in recommendations of a moral and natural order, and on justice under all its forms, especially those of language and loyalty, on the energy in the will, and conscientiousness in responsibility. All that would be artificial or purely formulary is foreign to the earnest and realistic spirit of St. Benedict. It seems to us that his demand for reverence before God emanates from a disposition of soul seeking above all an attitude of truth in prayer.

Outside of that which would be sin or might lead to it, Benedictine spirituality feels love for all the works of creation. Does it not tend by reason of the liturgical life to consider man as the voice of this creation to praise God? There is in St. Benedict a profound sense of harmony between the order of nature and that of grace. Benedictine tradition has always accepted the cult of the beautiful and of art under its various forms as a means to glorify God according to the precept: *to serve God by means of the goods that He has placed at our disposal; and that in all things God may be glorified.*<sup>69</sup>

In this sound and tranquil complacency for the works of creation, the spirit of St. Francis of Sales is certainly related to that of St. Benedict. The comparisons which enliven his writings denote a gaze of love constantly based on nature, on flowers, birds, fish. For him as for St. Benedict every created thing may serve as

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a ladder to raise up the soul to divine praise.

In the direction of souls we discern again in St. Benedict this profound understanding of nature. The Patriarch recommends principally to the superior the two following norms: *to conform and adapt himself to each individual character; and to take care to be loved rather than feared.*<sup>70</sup> Are not these two qualities precisely those which the letters of St. Francis express so *profusely*?

Let us note, finally, in our two Saints, a quality which, added to all the others, can only render them more perfectly human; it is urbanity. St. Benedict, with all his austerity, never ceases to be polite, always careful to preserve in the relations between men a character of respect, of dignity, of reserve, of kindness, of simple but perfect urbanity.<sup>71</sup> If a strange monk comes to the monastery and if his demands make him a troublesome guest, it is necessary that he leave, says St. Benedict, but he recommends that it be told him politely. Each guest will be received with marks of deference according to his position. On the days of fast it is necessary that the superior break the fast in order not to let the guest eat alone. The brethren on meeting shall greet one another; the younger ones must hasten to rise and give place to their elders. When a monk speaks he must do so softly and without laughter. It is necessary that the brethren be careful to show respect to all

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men. The prescriptions of St. Benedict concerning cleanliness of the body and of clothing suggests to us again that his care for eternal realities did not prevent him from having a certain reasonable care for this life. St. Benedict in his time loved that which was so dear to St. Francis and which was called by this latter; "the sweet and sincere courtesy which offends no one and obliges everybody."<sup>72</sup>

Let us then conclude: St. Benedict has not, as St. Francis de Sales, the art of giving to the things of devotion a gracious, sensible, and attractive air; but under very different coverings we find between his spirituality and that of the Bishop of Geneva a deep relation. Their doctrines are characterized by the spirit of discretion; they direct the gaze of the soul primarily on God rather than on the *ego*; they consider love not only as the end of the interior life but as the generating principle of the flight of the soul. For the two Saints asceticism is above all obedience, and this obedience has a unitive function; sanctification results especially from the little actions of every day. Finally the teaching of the Rule and that which Philothea receives, while conducting the soul towards the heights of spirituality, does not remain less profoundly and wholesomely human in the conception of life and the direction of conscience.

This doctrinal ensemble tends to procure to the Christian soul a certain ease in its march,

a facility in its relations with the Lord. This interior liberty in the service of God is the mark of the true children of the Heavenly Father: it results from habitual fidelity to love. When in all circumstances the heart adheres firmly to God alone it begins no longer to consider the prescriptions and the different practices of devotion as having an absolute value in themselves. It holds them rather as means that the Name of God may be sanctified, His kingdom spread, His will done, and these means have no other importance in his eyes except in the measure in which, at each moment, it appears that God wishes their utilization.

This liberty of spirit is an authentic flower of the spirituality of St. Francis. The Saint desires it among his daughters: "...in everything I desire that you have a holy liberty of spirit regarding the means of perfecting yourself."<sup>73</sup>

Elsewhere he defines it: "a detachment, a freeing of the Christian heart from all things in order to follow the known will of God.... He who lacks this holy liberty is overwhelmed by sadness and melancholy when he cannot do that which he has planned, though he may still do a better thing."<sup>74</sup>

The Saint is watchful to impede the abuse of this liberty of spirit: "No one should ever give up his practices and common rules of vir-



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tue unless he sees the will of God on the other side." Thus understood, liberty of spirit is far from laxity, infidelity, lack of zeal; it is on the contrary an adhesion to the divine will, independently of the human means of sanctification.

Now this liberty of spirit, so much thought of by St. Francis de Sales is precisely the recognized characteristic of Benedictine spirituality. Is it not the *a posteriori* proof of the relation between the teachings of the two Saints?

Father Faber writes: "The spirit of the Catholic religion is a spirit of ease, a spirit of liberty and this was especially the lot of the ancient Benedictine ascetic writers. Modern authors have sought to limit everything, to make it precise...by over-charging devotion they have lowered it."<sup>75</sup>

In truth St. Benedict loves the observance of the Rule but he wishes this observance united to a holy spirit of liberty. Night silence is strict, but if a guest comes one must speak to him; fasting is the rule, but to put a guest at ease the superior will break his fast and eat with the stranger. Thus in many circumstances, whether it is a question of table or of work we find in him the constant tendency to make charity predominate over the rigidity of the prescriptions. Even where it is a question of the Divine Office he allows the superior to judge concerning exceptions.<sup>76</sup> The Patriarch wishes



moreover that *no one in the house of God suffer interior sadness or excitement*, that one walk *with the heart enlarged*, and even in Lent *with joy of the Holy Spirit*.<sup>77</sup> These are signs of liberty of spirit. This liberty is favored also by the fact that the ever discreet prescriptions of the Rule do not complicate life but simplify it. Since St. Benedict did not compose any method of prayer, in the modern sense of the word, the part played in private prayer by spontaneity and by divine grace seems less diminished. Finally and especially, participation in the liturgical life, in the prayer of Christ and of the Church develops this feeling of spiritual liberty proper to the children of God, living in the house of their father, in the abundance of goods and of mercy from on high.<sup>78</sup>

We may affirm, then, that a large and enlivening spirit of liberty circulates in the spirituality of St. Benedict and in that of St. Francis de Sales. By this sign we are able to recognize the profound relation of the two souls which conceived these spiritualities.

In the course of these pages we have tried primarily to draw from the text of the Rule itself the fundamental details of the moral physiognomy of the Patriarch-legislator. We have understood them as forming an essentially well-balanced collection, joining in the Man of God, holy and religious gravity with the precise and practical desire of good order, of right ad-

ministration, of a strong and supple organization. This character appeared to us as uncompromising in certain of its aspects, and as wisely dominating, but this power of the soul, this natural superiority, is softened or tempered by a weighed spirit of equity and of just measure, by a kindness of heart truly paternal, by a keen psychological sense, discerning what may be expected from the virtue and capabilities of each one.

Such must be the principal details of character of him who, in full decadence of Roman civilization, during the century of barbarian invasions, wrote this venerable Rule, where according to Bossuet, "correction has all its firmness, condescendence all its attraction...strength its exercise, and weakness its support."<sup>79</sup>

Thanks to the narration of the Dialogues of St. Gregory, the physiognomy of the Patriarch is shown to us with more relief, in the drama and movement of life. The holy Pope has made us contemplate the Man of God *regulating his manners from infancy with the maturity of an aged man*. Benedict appeared to us already great and firm when he left the world and hid himself in his retreat at Subiaco. The monastic life organized by Cassian, the prestige of his miracles and his prophetic views, the sublimity of his prayer raise up before all his moral physiognomy in the power of a sanctity and majesty more than human. He would seem dis-

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tant from us if an equilibrium of qualities closer to our humble level did not temper the impression of this personality greater than nature. Kindness under so many forms, the stooping down to our miseries, fidelity to daily duty, simplicity, the spirit of organization complete the sketch of the harmonious unity of this perfect physiognomy.

Finally the examination of the relation of spirit between St. Benedict and St. Francis permits us to make the reader penetrate further into the understanding of the characteristic tendencies of the spiritual doctrine of the holy Patriarch. The exposé of certain points of his ascetical teaching has authorized us to mark with a shade nearer the life of the soul and of the spirit that which was this sense of just measure proper to St. Benedict; how the profound orientations of his being come together fully in one only and silent search—that of God and of His will; how the secret forces of his life were interior attitudes of love and humility; how, finally, the human and the divine, the action of grace and the consideration of nature in that which it has of good, admirably compenetrated one another, and are united in his soul in a firm union.

The Benedictine doctrine, envisaged as it is here, certainly overflows the framework of the claustral life. We have considered it less as a whole system, a theory agreed on, than as an

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ensemble of directive norms and orientations of thought. We believe that we have shown that this rule, written in a very backward epoch, has a higher purpose in our eyes, than to trace the lines of life proper to monastic existences. It contains something more than the fixing of a horarium and of punctual prescriptions. It contains a spirit of just measure, elevating the soul in the constant search for God. Far from choking the heart it tends to expand it. It fortifies the will and brings to the judgment a formation for practical appreciation of the things of time and of eternity.

That is why, at every epoch, monks and laymen could find in the thought of St. Benedict the same doctrine which illumines the understanding of life. As Henry Bordeaux wrote recently: "The human heart does not change any more than death."<sup>80</sup> After fourteen centuries then, this holy Rule keeps for our souls all its actuality: it continues to live, thanks to the beneficent sap which circulates under the brevity and simplicity of the letter.

In our days when the complexity and agitation of existence excites souls, dissipates and scatters them, may the Benedictine doctrine be for many a source of strong life, lived for God, in the acceptance of the duties of one's state, in charity, and in peace!

### NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

<sup>1</sup> St. Francis always remained very attached to the traditional forms of piety in the Church, not only because he considered Holy Mass and the liturgical offices as stimulants for seeking after personal perfection, but because they are worship of God.

<sup>2</sup> Dom Benedict Mackey died at the College of Sant' Anselmo, Rome, on Jan. 8, 1906, in the 41st year of his monastic profession. For a short time he had been procurator at the Roman Court for the English Congregation of Benedictines. He had consecrated his laborious life to the study of the manuscripts and the first editions of St. Francis de Sales. The first twelve volumes of the edition of Annecy were published under his direction. They include all the treatises of the Saint, all the sermons and letters up to 1604.

<sup>3</sup> *Dialogues*, book 2, ch. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Discretion is not to be referred to the cardinal virtue of temperance which moderates our will, but to the cardinal virtue of prudence, which is a habit of righteousness and of penetration of judgment, ordained to regulate our moral conduct. (Cf. *S. Th.*, 2-2, q. 47, sq.)

<sup>5</sup> *Préface de l'Introduction à la Vie dévote*. Unless otherwise indicated citations of St. Francis are according to the edition of Annecy.

<sup>6</sup> H. Bremond, *Hist. litt. du sentiment relig. en France*, 1, 108.

<sup>7</sup> *Rule*, ch. 31 & 44.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 34 & 40.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 49 & 40.

<sup>13</sup> F. Vincent, *S. Francois de Sales, directeur d'âmes*, p. 651 & 560.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Mme. Brulart, t. 13, 53.



- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, t. 12, 351-2.
- <sup>16</sup> *Vrays Entrétiens*, VI. *De la cordialité*.
- <sup>17</sup> Letter to Mme. de la Flechere, t. 14, 53-4.
- <sup>18</sup> Letter to the Abbess of Puits-d'Orbe, t. 12, 339-40.
- <sup>19</sup> *Revue Latine*, 1904, p. 518.
- <sup>20</sup> Letter to Mere Favre, t. 20, 48.
- <sup>21</sup> Bremond, *op. cit.* 3, p. 29.
- <sup>22</sup> Fr. Vincent, *op. cit.* p. 118.
- <sup>23</sup> *Vrays Entrétiens*, 13, *De la desappropriation*.
- <sup>24</sup> *Rule*, ch. 7.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 3, 19, 20, 57.
- <sup>27</sup> *Vie dévoté*, 2, 13.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 & Ps. 15, 122, 24.
- <sup>29</sup> *Vrays Entrétiens*, 12, *De la simplicité*.
- <sup>30</sup> Letter to S. Chantal, 13, 5.
- <sup>31</sup> *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, 6,10.
- <sup>32</sup> *Vrays Entrétiens*, 12, *De la simplicité*.
- <sup>33</sup> *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, 8,2.
- <sup>34</sup> *Vrays Entrétiens*, 12, *De la simplicité*.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> *Traite de l'amour de Dieu*, Preface.
- <sup>37</sup> *Rule*, ch. 68.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 7.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Prologue.
- <sup>41</sup> *Dialogues*, 1.3, ch. 16.
- <sup>42</sup> Cassian, *Institutions*, 4, 39.
- <sup>43</sup> Dom C. Marmion, *Le Christ idéal du moine*, p. 184.
- <sup>44</sup> *Expositio regulæ ab Hildemaro tradita*, ch. 5, p. 189.
- <sup>45</sup> *Miroir de l'Ame*, 5, 5 & 7, 4.
- <sup>46</sup> Letter to the Soeur de Soulfour, 1603; 12, p. 169.
- <sup>47</sup> *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, 9,9.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 7; 12, 8 & 7.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 8; 8, 1.



- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 7,9.  
<sup>51</sup> *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, 7,7.  
<sup>52</sup> Letter to la Baronne de Chantal, 13, p. 184.  
<sup>53</sup> *In epist. I Joan.*, Tract. 8, n. 8.  
<sup>54</sup> Cf. D. H. Quentin, *Rev. de philosophie*, 21, p. 227 sq. Also D. C. Marmion, *Le Christ idéal du moine*, p. 248 & 352-54.  
<sup>55</sup> *Rule*, ch. 4, 33, 7, 3, 71, 72, 5, 7.  
<sup>56</sup> D. C. Marmion, *op. cit.*, p. 343.  
<sup>57</sup> Letter to Présidente Brulart, 1605; 13, p. 20-21.  
<sup>58</sup> *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, 9, 6.  
<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 4.  
<sup>60</sup> *Vrays Entrétiens*, 21, p. 384.  
<sup>61</sup> *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, 8,2.  
<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 9,13.  
<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 6,11.  
<sup>64</sup> *Rule*, ch. 71.  
<sup>65</sup> *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, 12,6.  
<sup>66</sup> Letter to the Baronne de Chantal, 13, p. 92.  
<sup>67</sup> Letter to Présidente Brulart, 13, p. 53 & 291.  
<sup>68</sup> *Rule*, ch. 52, 1, 4.  
<sup>69</sup> *Rule*, Prologue & ch. 57.  
<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 2 & 64.  
<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 61, 53, 63, 7, 4, 36, 55.  
<sup>72</sup> Letter to St. Francis from a young man, 9, p. 404.  
<sup>73</sup> Letter to Baronne de Chantal, 12, p. 265.  
<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, p. 363 sq.  
<sup>75</sup> P. Faber, *Tout pour Jesus*, ch. 8, div. 8.  
<sup>76</sup> *Rule*, ch. 50.  
<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 31, Prologue, ch. 49.  
<sup>78</sup> Cf. D. C. Marmion, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-9, 427-8.  
<sup>79</sup> Bossuet, *Panegyrique de S. Benoit*.  
<sup>80</sup> *S. Francois de Sales et notre coeur de chair*, p. 109.